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MODERN INDIAN NOVELS IN TRANSLATION

Gopinath Mohanty

# The Survivor

Translated from the Oriya original
by Bikram K Das

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# THE SURVIVOR

*Clouds hold the water drawn from the ocean,*
*but it is the clouds to which people look.*
- Jnaneshwar

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Gopinath Mohanty

# THE SURVIVOR

*(Danapani)*

Translated from the Oriya original by
BIKRAM K. DAS

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## About this series

Whatever our quarrels and shifting factions, all Indians know that they have a complex, stable system of values, beliefs and practices which — though forged long ago — has never really been interrupted. It still underlines the surface differences and makes them comprehensible. Our programme of translations is an exploration of this Indian tradition which is one of humankind's most enduring attempts to create an order of existence that would make life both tolerable and meaningful.

The method we have adopted is to translate selections from the corpus of fiction Indians have created after their Independence (1947). It is our hope that these novels will express most of the ideas, customs, unquestioned assumptions and the persistent doubts that have characterised Indian life for at least a thousand years, and, more recently, after the impact of western ways of thinking on it.

Novels from Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, Gujarati, Oriya, Marathi, Punjabi, Urdu, Bengali and Hindi have been selected. We hope to include more Indian languages in the next phase.

This project has been made possible by the generosity of MR. AR. Educational Trust, of which Sri A.M.M. Arunachalam is the Trustee. Known to us, there has never been such a big and systematic programme of translations sponsored by the private sector.

Some of the footnotes may seem excessive, but they have been prepared with non-Indian readers in mind.

MINI KRISHNAN
*Project Editor*

# Introduction

Gopinath Mohanty was a major Indian novelist who wrote in Oriya. He was equally successful in fictional accounts of the life-style of the primitive tribes, the Kondhs and Parajas of Orissa, as also the middle class society of Oriya villages and small towns. If *Paraja* and *Amrutara Santana* are his major novels on the tribal theme, and *Mati Matal*, which received the Bharatiya Jnanpith, Award, is a classic of the eternal Indian village, *Danapani* is a fascinatingly vivid portrayal of the hopes and frustrations, the dreams and aspirations of middle-class town dwellers in Orissa. The original title of the novel is a colloquial Oriya phrase which literally means a morsel of food (or bare subsistence) and water. But the poignant phrase also implies, in a subtle way, one's struggle for existence or assertion, *dana* and *pani* symbolishing the means for survival.

The novel's setting is a small town mostly inhabited by the officials of a private firm. It is a faceless town and lacks a character. It is as drab and unromantic as the task of earning one's daily bread. So too is the business house where the protagonist Balidatta works for his living. It is easy to see that it is the prototype of any office, government, corporate or private. Balidatta is young, ambitious and has a tendency to crawl upwards anyhow, even if it means pushing out others who are also cringing before their superiors. He knows climbing has a price which may take many forms: from obtaining pig manure for someone's garden to acquiescing and even encouraging his wife to be accessible and friendly to others. But he is prepared to pay the price. Left to himself he is neither dynamic as a person nor clever enough to make it to the top.

The small town has its "dwarf" inhabitants, each living with a sense of non-fulfilment and deprivation. Balidatta, like many of his colleagues, has his own quota of little joys and sorrows, angers and anguishes. Like others he too is keen to please the gods that be and propitiate them for achieving power.

If in *Paraja* and *Amrutara Santana*, his novels based upon ibal life, Gopinath created unforgettable characters like Sukru ni and Sarabu Saonta picked up from the tribal world, large-earted men who suffer exploitation and humiliation by the uel social order, by contrast Balidatta, an equally powerful ortrayal, is a small man, aware of his own sense of inadequacy d psychological inhibitions. His relationship, with his wife arojini is complex, almost on the same level as his relation o the office and the little town where he lives, composed of lements of intimacy and indifference. Quite often he is like helpless child whom Sarojini has to look after, console and lmost put to sleep. For Balidatta power and sex look alike nd run nearly parallel. Their enjoyment seems identical. In urn Sarojini is affectionate, tries to stand by him in difficulties nd consoles him when he feels broken or defeated, and yet, quite often, both look beyond this relationship for happiness lsewhere, in some crude dreams of riches and forbidden plea-sures. The novel beautifully unfolds their relationship, as their ove for each other is slowly submerged by the hidden craze for power and authority in Balidatta, and Sarojini's slow steps on the road to promiscuity.

The world around is the grey, colourless middle-class world of the small town: relentless, petty, mean, full of gossip and ru-mour and yet fairly intimate and unchanging. Besides Balidatta and Sarojini, the other characters are also neatly etched. Venkat Rao, for whose wife Balidatta nurses a soft corner; Santu-da the faceless, self-effacing and ever smiling officer; Mahapatra Babu, the middle-level officer who constantly feels lost and forlorn; Mr. Sharma, the top boss and Ranjit Babu, the Num-ber Two, whose relationship is mutually ambivalent. They are all superbly portrayed as amoral and complacent human be-ings almost totally indifferent to any permanent value or deep relationship. Their wives can only discuss all the inanities of drawing room culture and are never able to look beyond it.

It is against this back-drop that Balidatta moves up slowly in office, determined as ever and without a smile, making himself and his wife more and more vulnerable to pressures, and learn-ing to wear different sets of masks at different points of time and

becoming transformed imperceptibly into a non-person. Outwardly, time passes; they look brighter, they become richer. Inwardly they gradually wilt and wither. Not that they ever held any values very dearly. Not that they were ever embodiments of simplicity or primeval innocence. *Danapani* is not the story of the noble savage or the innocent little man gradually getting corrupted by the evil influence of a bureaucratic, hierarchical and competitive society. That race, no doubt, it portrays, though it is not as relentless as in the western world. It moves through twists and turns, through the dropping of insinuations and remarks, through light and shade in the backyard of the mind. It is very difficult to sum up the strange, moving power of the novel. It would not have been so moving if it was only the story of the protagonist's transformation in his quest for power or in search of more of the better things of life. The novel is not that alone. It is also the story of an unusual relationship between Balidatta and Sarojini, Sharma and Ranjit Babu, Venkat Rao and his wife and many others in the grey twilight world of a town without values and permanencies.

Throughout the novel, even as Balidatta rises in the company, he is never a happy person. Something is lacking, something always eludes him like the distant cloud. Dreams and visions pass away, the heart remains ever dried up, waiting for the rains. Sarojini is necessary for the rise to the room at the top, but he cannot reconcile himself to the irony of life, and anger wells up within him when Sharma or Ranjit Babu ask her to eat a little more or cast hungry looks at her. Slowly something snaps between Balidatta and Sarojini. At the end of the novel we see the tired Balidatta returning home only to be told that Sarojini has just gone out somewhere with "one of those Babus", and then he calls the steno and his chaprasi to begin work on yet another file and seek refuge in his familiar world of meaningless words.

Gopinath Mohanty's prose has qualities of poetry. It incorporates lyricism, vibrant folk-idiom and delicate symbolism within its structure. It is not easy to recapture the lyricism and richness of folk-idiom in the English language. The translator has done an extremely creditable job in retaining a large part of

ıe flavour of the original in the translations. His earlier trans-
tion of Mohanty's *Paraja* won high acclaim. I have no doubt
ıat sensitive readers will discern the sincerity and meticulous
ıanner in which he has translated this difficult novel as well.

SITAKANTH MOHAPATRA

# One

Balidatta trudged through the swineherds' village followed by the bharua[1] who carried a pair of baskets slung from a bamboo yoke. He had to get some pig manure—not for himself but for the Sahib's bungalow.

"A few handfuls of pig manure would really make these roses bloom, mali[2]" the Memsahib[3] had said to the gardener. "Pig manure for the roses, horse dung for the cannas, and lots of water!"

Balidatta was no mali, but a junior clerk in a British trading company.

On his way home after the morning's work, he had overheard the Memsahib's instructions to the mali as he walked past the Sahib's[4] wondrous garden. Then, unasked, he had ventured: "Pig manure? I'll get it for you—as much as you want! I'm on my way now!"



The Memsahib had smiled.

With only that memory to prop him up, Balidatta was sweating his way through the blazing afternoon, with the bharua trailing behind. The bowl of soaked rice, gulped down hurriedly in the morning, had long since turned to water in his stomach. His tattered handkerchief could no longer cope with the rivers of perspiration. Laboriously plucking pig excrement out of the filth, he strode ahead valiantly, driven by his visions.

"Sir, the baskets are full," the bharua said. "We've got enough."

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[1] labourer hired to carry loads.

[2] professional gardener.

[3] term used by Indians of low rank to address Englishwomen or wives of highly-placed Indians ("memsahib" is sometimes abbreviated to "mem".)

[4] term used by Indians to address Englishmen. Also used as a synonym for the "boss" (of any race).

"Enough?" Balidatta replied. "Have you seen how many rose plants there are? The baskets must be piled high, like temple towers."

The bharua sighed, reeling from the sun. Balidatta patted his sodden back and cajoled: "Come on, brother! You will be paid well."

And, returning with the precious load, who should he run into but Mr Mohapatra, attired in a suit and mounted on a bicycle. He was an executive in the same company, who had risen from the ranks.

"What news, Balidatta?" Mr Mohapatra greeted him, dismounting. "Where are you going on this hot afternoon?"

Balidatta tensed. Mr Mohapatra was known to have a keen nose for office gossip.

"What's up?" Mr Mohapatra went on. "Is everything well?"

"Yes sir, by your grace," Balidatta replied.

"By the way, Balidatta, what did the Sahib write on the memo I had sent him?" Mr Mohapatra asked.

"It's still on his desk, sir. I wouldn't know."

"I went to see him this morning, Balidatta. And do you know what the Sahib did? First he offered me a chair, and then he pulled out his cigarette case and offered me a cigarette! I had to smoke it, what else could I do? I was flabbergasted!"



"But why sir, after all, you are not like the rest of us. In what way can the Sahib equal you — in education, or in ability? Other than his white skin, what does he have? I tell you sir, you are going to be our next Sahib, that's certain. What do the company bosses living abroad know? You'll be managing this depot, sir."

"Have a paan[1], Balidatta" Mr Mohapatra said, offering his box of spiced betel leaves. "Careful, the tobacco is strong."

"I eat one of *your* paans sir? Ghee[2] in a frog's belly?"

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[1] the soft green leaf of a creeper (the betel vine), folded around a mixture of crushed areca nuts (betel nuts), slaked lime (calcium hydroxide) and catechu or "kattha", a red vegetable dye, sometimes with tobacco added. The chewing of paan is not only an addiction with many Indians, it is a social ritual; in fact, paan is generally offered to the gods as part of Hindu worship. The people of Orissa, where this story is set, are known for their love of paan.

[2] clarified butter.

"Oh, have one," Mr Mohapatra urged, " you're a young man! I may be forty now, Balidatta, but you won't believe me if I tell you what I could eat when I was twenty-five, like you."

He *will* tell me, Balidatta thought, he won't let go. And the Memsahib will go away somewhere and won't see me arriving with the pig manure. The bharua has come to a halt and there's nothing I can say.

"Go, go, why have you stopped?" he said to the bharua.

"What's in the baskets, Balidatta?" Mr Mohapatra asked.

"Sir, I've planted a patch of greens in my garden and was taking some manure home" Balidatta replied.

"What did you pay for it? You know, Balidatta, I've planted some brinjals[1] and they're turning yellow for want of manure. Where did you find it? Bharua, bring some to my house, do you understand?"

Easier to rig up a ladder to heaven than retort to the mighty, Balidatta thought.

Moistening his throat with spittle he said: "No problem, sir. I'll deliver it personally. The Sahib is most pleased with you, sir."



"How did you know, Balidatta? Who told you? So you do know what he wrote about me! Tell me, tell me. Oh, isn't it hot here? Come, let's go over to my place. I say, Balidatta Babu[2], you're a sly one! Come, let's go."

"Sir, you'll come to know everything. But don't forget the sweets for poor Balidatta! I must go, sir, the Sahib has sent for me."

"Very well then. But you are really efficient, Balidatta Babu. I have never seen such a sense of responsibility in one so young.

"Anyway, I'm glad things are under control. That's why he offered me the cigarette; I was amazed. He never does this with anyone else! It's not easy to tame such a powerful man."

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[1] aubergine or egg plant.

[2] a word used after a Hindu gentleman's name, as a mark of respect. The word was also used by the British in India to refer to an Indian clerk, and by extension, to refer contemptuously to all Indians.

Balidatta smiled. Not a difficult trick to master this smile; it comes as naturally as putting kohl[1] into somebody else's eye.

Mr Mohapatra mounted his bicycle and pedalled away like the wind, eager to narrate the saga of the Sahib's cigarette. Abusing him mentally, Balidatta walked on.

On his left, the school. A ceremonial gate had been put up: the Sahib was to preside over a function that evening. The young schoolmaster, Arun Babu, was teaching the children to sing *Jana gana mana.*[2] Addressed to the Sahib, of course.

Balidatta looked around him, irritated by all this monkey business. An envious nerve twitched within him: *he* had no such opportunity. But at the conscious level, it was his outraged nationalism: what an insult! Did Arun Babu have no sense of propriety?

"Balidatta Babu!"

"Oh, Arun Babu! What will the Sahib think? So you really are . . ."

"Two birds with one stone, Balidatta Babu! The Sahib will understand all right. What a great man he is—truly India's Bhagya Vidhata[3]. And the public will be charmed to hear their favourite song. It's only a song, after all. One has to know the art of oiling these days! Who is there to protect us?"



Balidatta's laughter gushed forth.

What did he stand to lose?

Surely, Arun Babu couldn't be very intelligent! Does an intelligent person make a declaration of his intentions?

And so, on he went, with the bharua following.

One o'clock in the afternoon. Blinding sun. The Memsahib gone; the mali asleep. If he dumped the manure and left, the mali would claim the credit. Balidatta had no choice; he would have to wait.

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[1] eye-shadow, prepared from lamp-black (soot), used by Indian ladies and young children.

[2] the opening words of a Bengali song written by the Nobel-Prize winning poet Rabindranath Tagore. The first line of the song, now India's national anthem, is: *Jana gana mana adhinayaka jaya hey, Bharata bhagya vidhata ("Hail to thee, O Ruler of India's destiny, Leader of the minds of her people").* The words are addressed to God, but some critics raised a controversy by claiming that they were addressed to King George V, the British monarch.

[3] ruler of India's destiny. Here, it is a flattering reference to the "Sahib" (the British boss of the Company).

All around him, protected from the sun, the flowers nodded in their beds. The gentle breeze fanned him. Nature was enjoying a siesta. Beyond the little shed, a mother hen foraged with her brood. The melancholy neighing of the Sahib's horse rang out from the stables; the huge dog lay panting on the verandah, its foot-long tongue hanging from its mouth. On the other side of the house, the young ayah[1] was drying clothes in the sun, her hair loose and her eyes liquid like those of some wild animal. So much to see, so much to think about.

But Balidatta had no eyes for nature; as he stood in the shade, drying his perspiration, all he could think of was himself.

A puny body which had refused to flower ... hardly any education, no learned titles to decorate his name. An unknown village in some remote corner of the land, the crumbling hut with its gaping thatch, bowed with debt, where an ancient rheumatic father wheezed all night on the verandah. A nameless creature from a nameless, dusty by-lane was Balia.

But he had needed an identity.

For as long as he could remember he had torn at the roots that tied him to his forefathers. Cast away on unfriendly soil, he had learned to fight to stay alive, to cling and to creep and to climb, throwing out tendrils, clutching at every support, struggling to keep his head up and growing to suit his own measurements.



But he wanted to grow further.

"Babu, I must go now," the bharua said.

"Very well, then. Dump it here."

Balidatta sighed. He suddenly felt hot and hungry.

## Two

There was a row of tiny houses, all alike, lining the road, and in one of these Balidatta and Sarojini had set up their little world. There

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[1] housemaid.

was another row of houses, slightly bigger, on the other side of the road.

Sarojini was Balidatta's wife.

The gilt brooch on her shoulder was engraved with the motto "Your Husband, Your Master"—a sentiment underlined by the streak of vermilion[1] in the parting of her hair. On her finger was a ring inscribed with Balidatta's name. A solitary photograph hung on the bedroom wall.

The ingredients of Sarojini's household were spread out everywhere. Inside the tiny compound was the little garden, with patches of greens, brinjals and ladies' fingers[2]; next to the outdoor lavatory was the mango tree, in the shade of which young banana plants grew; the lime tree in the courtyard was heavy with blossoms. The two tin trunks in the bedroom contained their worldly possessions; all of Sarojini's saris as well as Balidatta's clothes hung from the bamboo pole suspended, by two ropes, from the ceiling. There were a few earthen pots in the store room, along with some battered cooking utensils; next to that was the kitchen, with the firewood stored outside, in the open. Since Sarojini had plenty of time, she inspected her belongings frequently, delighting in the glow of possession. Wielding her broom, the bunch of keys jangling from the end of her sari[3], she was filled with a sense of achievement as she swept the house clean for the seventh time.



Sarojini was not at all like her husband, in body or mind. At least a couple of inches taller, she was stoutly built; where Balidatta's face was gaunt, hers was round and full. She had large teeth.

Everything about her was large, she felt. The household chores were not enough to keep her occupied; there was little to do, no noisy brats to keep her busy. She would sit all day at the window, thoughtful, gazing into the distance as though in expectation of some unknown thing.

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[1] married Hindu women wear vermilion (a red powder) in the parting of the hair. This is considered a sign of good fortune and widows do not wear it.

[2] a kind of vegetable (okra).

[3] a five metre length of material which Indian women tie about the waist and drape around their bodies.

Balidatta would find her thus when he returned from the office, twice each day. The thought that she was waiting for him filled him with exultation; for a moment, his body would emerge, shivering, out of the carapace that encrusted it. And Sarojini would rush to open the door for him, her smile bright as jasmine buds.

Two o'clock in the afternoon. Balidatta was on his way home, his thoughts filled with the cares of earning his daily bread. The road was cruel, but he must keep climbing. But after that, what?

In the house across the road, the young college student visiting his uncle during the vacation sat beside a pile of books, idly turning the pages. Suddenly, he looked up at the window of the house opposite. And then he remembered, it was time for his exercise! Flexing his arms, inflating his chest, he began his manoeuvres with a pair of dumb-bells. How imposing that hairy chest looked! The rock-like muscles bulged. Sarojini giggled behind the end of her sari; then slowly, amusement turned into wonder. Every nerve in her body tingled—she felt herself melting away. She slumped against the window, her mouth slightly agape, beads of perspiration glistening on her forehead, staring into the distance, bright eyes veiled with a film of sadness.



The exercise continued.

The student craned his neck and saw the statuesque figure at the window. But no, she wasn't looking at him! He thought, what dull clay these people are made of—how totally devoid of poetry! His self-respect was hurt and his lips curled in disgust. He had vowed to remain unmarried. It was far better to give himself to physical culture. He went inside the house, wiping away the futile sweat.

Sarojini was still transfixed at the window, mouth slightly open as though on the verge of a smile. Her vacant gaze was fixed on the distance; within, there was a kaleidoscope of images. This was the sight that greeted Balidatta. For an instant he forgot his high hopes, his quest for identity, his Sahib and his job. He drank in that sight through every pore of his body and his eyes turned moist with gratitude and self-reproach. Yes, it was for him that Sarojini sat waiting!

"Hello, dear—are you meditating?" he asked, braying with laughter.

Startled, Sarojini felt herself suddenly deluged in a torrent of familial responsibilities, as though a large pot had been emptied on her head, filling her with the penance of self-sacrifice. The smile and the look dedicated to her Lord and Master returned. Unlatching the door hurriedly, she hopped into the kitchen, as frisky as a tame kitten.

"So late!" she rebuked him. "Don't you ever feel hungry? Oh ma, how the sun has burnt you up! A curse on your job—is it going to take us to heaven?"

"All right, all right," he said. "Now hurry up and give me something to eat. I have to be back immediately."

In a moment, Sarojini had set everything in front of him: the little carpet, the tumbler[1] of water, the plateful of rice and vegetable. Balidatta sat down to eat.

Fanning the flies away with her hand, Sarojini said: "Our neighbour Ram Babu received another gift-basket today!"

"Is that so?" Balidatta said.



"Two or three villagers had come, and a bharua carrying rice, ghee, a bunch of plantains and a huge fish. In the wink of an eye Ram Babu's wife carried everything inside and bolted the door. And now all you can hear is the hiss and crackle of frying fish."

"Well, let it go," Balidatta said indistinctly through a mouthful of rice. "How does it matter to us? Not everyone is like Ram Babu!"

"Well, I only mentioned it," Sarojini said. "But how can people do such things in broad daylight? Does nothing happen to them?"[2]

"Oh it does, it does. Who says it doesn't? Time takes care of everything." Balidatta spoke with such feeling that he had to gulp some water.

Sarojini looked up and saw his large Adam's apple bobbing up and down. She burst out laughing.

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[1] vessel, made of metal, used like a glass.

[2] Aren't they punished ? (Hindus believe that divine justice is handed out to people who do wrong deeds, both in this life and in future lives.)

"Why do you laugh?" he asked.

"At what you just said: 'Time takes care of everything.' One word in your Sahib's ear, and Ram Babu's wife will be rolling in the dust. How that baby elephant struts about! One gold ornament after another! Now tell me, is Ram Babu to be our god? Didn't you say he has practically no education? Not even a matriculate! If only you talked to the Sahib . . ."

And Sarojini gazed tenderly at her husband's face—at the future which lay behind that face: a future redolent with baskets of fruit, gold ornaments and frying fish.

Balidatta laughed and said: "Have patience—your day will come."

Sarojini was preparing a paan for him and Balidatta went into the sitting room, which overlooked the road. Shall I tell her about today? He thought. For a long time he had been trying in vain to find a way in. But today, the door seemed to have opened, just a little. If I tell Sarojini, the neighbours are bound to know, he thought. *He* had learnt to keep a secret—it was part of his job, and so he never told his wife everything. And Balidatta was lost once again in the rigmaroles of the quest for his daily bread.



Sarojini gave him his paan and picked up the utensils from which he had eaten. Horse hooves rang out in the distance and at once his mind echoed: "The Sahib!" Out of habit, he spat out the half-chewed paan and hissed: "Sarojini, the Sahib!"

"Oh ma!" she shrieked. "That bald, red-faced ape?"

"It's nothing," he said. "I say, Saroj—Saroj, do come here."

Laughing, she joined him in the outer room. The clatter of hooves came nearer. Leaning against the window bars, Sarojini looked out. The college student was looking in their direction; his lips moved as though he was trying to memorise something out of the book which he held. At her back, Balidatta was stooping, trying to peep through the half-open window.

The Sahib was coming.

Twice each day the Sahib galloped his horse past their houses, revealing himself like a god to his devotees.

But, surprise! What's this she sees? Only the saddled horse, rushing like the wind the rider missing!

"Saroj, Saroj," Balidatta shouted, "Quick! Give me my office clothes!" And in an instant, he had pulled his clothes on and rushed out like a madman, in the direction from which the horse had come. Some of the neighbours looked on curiously; others were trying to find out what had happened—but Balidatta was off like a flash.

A pack of stray dogs followed him, barking excitedly. Balidatta clutched the waistband of his trousers with one hand as he ran; he had had no time to button them up. His shoes, unlaced, flapped loosely. He was racing against his own fate.

He didn't have to go far. There, rising from the dust, was the Sahib. What a sight he was! Bathed in dust, scratched and bruised from the fall. Talking excitedly, Balidatta went round and round the Sahib, only to be met with words of abuse. Then he realised, the Sahib hated sympathy! He limped after the horse. Balidatta sent one group of people to look for the horse and another to inform the Sahib's syce[1]. Now there was nothing to do except follow in the Sahib's footsteps, which he did solemnly, with measured tread.



Soon there was a little procession, with the Sahib leading and the puny Balidatta a few steps behind, marching in triumph, smiling proudly at the populace. Fate had brought him this glorious opportunity; who could stop him now? His colleagues, in timid groups, stood at a respectful distance. They had arrived too late! Balidatta was ordering them about at will; out of the corner of his eye, he glanced at the Sahib, trying to read his mind. But the Sahib could be wearing a mask.

The syce was holding the reins of the restless horse. The Sahib patted the animal's back and bent to examine its legs. A murmur of amazement went up: what love for a mere horse! Balidatta too had stopped to examine the horse's legs. This was the first time he had looked at a horse with curiosity: yes, this was indeed a horse's leg—no doubt about that. But since the Sahib was looking at it so closely, he could do no less.

"Get the horse doctor!" the Sahib shouted, pointing towards the veterinarian's quarters. Snatching the bicycle that someone

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[1] a groom who takes care of horses.

in the crowd was holding, Balidatta sped away like a deer, leaving the poor man gaping in surprise.

His heart roared with exultation as he pedalled away. This is your chance, your chance! His muscles ached, his breath came in rapid pants and there was a fierce hammering in his head, but he was immune to pain. As the veterinarian and he returned to where the Sahib stood, he saw the Sahib kneeling in the grass, stroking the horse's injured leg.

Why did I never learn this art? Balidatta thought. Drunk with victory, he too knelt down to examine the horse's hind legs, as though about to make a discovery. The horse lashed out; fortunately, it missed, but Balidatta turned a most undignified somersault. The Sahib roared at him angrily. Tears filled his eyes.

Downcast, he stood at some distance. A single jolt had flipped the bullock cart of his fate completely over.

His colleagues were smirking in sympathy: "Come and join us, Balidatta Babu." For five minutes he plumbed the depths—but his spirits would not be subdued. He turned round and walked towards the garden. Wonderful! The Memsahib was taking a stroll.



"Good morning!" he greeted her.

"Good evening, babu" she replied. He could have bitten his tongue off ! Of course, it was nearly evening. The Memsahib had witnessed his embarrassment; but he wasn't going to hesitate. He who hesitates is lost! With a flourish, he pointed out to her all his achievements of the morning—the piles of horse and pig manure. No matter how low he had fallen, his words soared as he narrated his exploits. The Memsahib was nodding approval—oh, what joy! His eloquence grew.

"Oh, I see," the Memsahib said. "Mali, will you take this manure and spread it out at the roots?"

She turned to her rose plants and hugged and kissed them. His colleagues were watching.

The Sahib was still kneeling beside his horse.

Three clerks awaited his pleasure, their arms piled high with office files.

"Urgent file, sir" old Kulamani Babu said, "Very urgent!"

"Urgent, my foot!" the Sahib growled. "I say, Babu, Oh damn!"

Balidatta rushed forward with a salaam[1].

"Babu, just write that this time I don't find anyone suitable" the Sahib said. "Oh, doctor, have a good look at this horse, will you?"

The other employees of the company, waiting at a distance, felt as though their faces had been smeared black. Balidatta walked away, clutching the papers.

People were beckoning from all directions, but he walked on calmly.

## THREE

"Why, your husband can gallop like a horse!" Ram Babu's wife said. "I couldn't believe my eyes! He may look like a grasshopper but he's quite a cheetah!"



How shall I answer her? Sarojini thought. She laughed and said "Not everyone is blessed with a pot belly. Some people *can* run."

"Well, run, by all means!" Ram Babu's wife said. "The tree lizard may run, but where can it go? Only as far as the kia[2] bush! At the month's end it will still be the same sixty rupees[3] no matter how much one runs around. So what's the use? What has to happen will happen, why all the fuss?"

"Elder sister, not all of us are born lucky, you know," Sarojini replied." "To some, fortune just comes crowding in through the front door as well as the back. But the rest of us have to work for it."

"Whose front and back door have you been watching?" Ram Babu's wife demanded.

"Oh, somebody's," Sarojini said.

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[1] salutation or gesture of respect, showing extreme humility.

[2] kind of cactus bush which bears fragrant flowers.

[3] unit of money in India.

"What evil times these are! If somebody has the ability, others will tear out their own hair! What good is jealousy anyway? It may burn people up, but it won't fill up anybody's house, will it?"

"Why should *we* be jealous, sister?" Sarojini said.

"Look at her! She's taking my words upon herself ! Surely, you weren't talking about me, were you?"

Just then, her infant third son howled: "Mother!"

"Coming!" Ram Babu's wife said, leaving.

Some words! More like a cold knife in the back!

Ram Babu's wife liked to carry the war to the enemy's camp, skirmishing from one battle-front to the other.

Sarojini sat dazed after she had left, wishing she could cry.

But who was there to sympathise with her?

One thing rankled in her mind: Balidatta had made a fool of himself. The thought had lain hidden, for worms to gnaw at; Ram Babu's foul-mouthed wife had only dragged it into the open. She didn't like to think about it—but thoughts were her only friends now.

How desperately her parents had searched for a proper match for her!



She had been the youngest of four sisters in a respected peasant family.

A good boy and a good home: the words had rung in her ears as she romped through the afternoons with her playmates, joking and giggling.

Her father had resolved: Sarojini's bridegroom would be a man in a hundred—educated and well-placed. And so the dowry would include a gold watch and a bicycle, which none of his other sons-in-law had got.

With the dowry settled, the bridegroom had appeared. The whole village was buzzing with gossip: the groom had arrived in procession, but where were the fireworks? How flat the music sounded! And then, the comments and footnotes on the bridegroom's looks: What! *He* is to wed our Saroj? A gold bowl for a jamun berry[1]? Pitched battles broke out before the

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[1] fruit of dark purple colour. (The expression is used to make fun of a man who has a very dark complexion.)

wedding: the bridegroom's party and the bride's relations, it was rumoured, had come to blows. Several guests left in a huff ! Every whisper reached Sarojini. And when the bridal palanquin was lifted off the ground, she clutched her father's hand for the last time and dutifully wailed "Father! Oh, how could you throw me away on the rubbish heap!"

And ever since, life's cartwheel had kept rolling; the fairytale prince had turned into the four-foot-nine-inch Balidatta.

Pride asserted itself occasionally: well, no matter what, he was hers entirely. After all, not everyone was born a prince! He was her treasure — and by God's grace, he would increase. He would have fame, build her a home. She bowed to her gods at dawn and dusk, and walked proudly. There was both a sister's affection and a mother's tenderness in the care she lavished on her frail husband.

But at other times she grew restless. While Balidatta snored, exhausted from the day's work and the endless weaving of plans, she would lie awake — quivering, burning, lashed by storms. She would fall asleep at last and wake to another day of domesticity.



Her neighbour's barbed words had upset her once again. Sitting beside the hearth, she dried her tears. Why are some people so cruel she thought; they are never satisfied until they've drawn blood! So much sorrow in God's creation!

The remembrance of her gods cheered her up. Her mind travelled to the dark little recess in her father's home where the brass images of the family deities had rested on the little wooden throne, cushioned on scarlet silk. The prayer bells tinkled and the joss sticks[1] sent up clouds of fragrance, announcing that the gods had accepted the daily offering of plantains or sweetened rice, and the children rushed to get their share. Large, red ants too were drawn by the sweet smell. Her mother would bow reverently to the gods while her father chanted the traditional hymns, petitioning the gods to heal his suffering. Sarojini would prostrate[2] herself.

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[1] thin pieces of wood or splintered bamboo, dipped in a mixture of fragrant herbs and then dried. When burnt, these incense sticks give out perfumed smoke. Used during worship.

[2] fall flat face down, on the ground, to show respect.

The firelight glowing through her tears awakened fresh memories: the pot of rice bubbling on her mother's hearth, the sights and smells of innocent girlhood, the shadows of unfulfilled dreams and the smarting of injured pride.

The bits of firewood in the hearth had turned to ashes. The dull routine of housekeeping would resume, together with habitual sorrows—the same anxieties and petty jealousies kept parading within her. Gradually, her mind would grow still. The sheer instinct to keep alive, to revive and recuperate, would assert itself; like a spider creating its web out of its own inner substances, she would begin to weave her future once again.

The warmth of the kitchen hearth made her drowsy: oh! how long would she have to wait? Why did he always come back so late? How lonely she was!

She shut the kitchen door and stepped into the outer room. In the house across the road, the college student was poring over a book. Sarojini tip-toed to the alcove and lit the oil lamp. There was no need for light, she knew; it would only reveal her presence. A little tremor of guilt warmed her being. She stood profiled against the window for a moment—and in the house opposite, the book was flipped shut, as though tugged by a string. The student turned down the wick of his lantern and stood breathless in the dark.



## Four

Venkat Rao, Balidatta's colleague and friend, was dark, tall and athletic, always smartly dressed, shoes spotless and glossy hair immaculate. He had never been known to speak a hurtful or thoughtless word. Nature seemed to have designed him to walk softly, unobtrusively.

He never discussed his personal affairs, never allowed his problems to affect his cheerfulness. The very soul of circumspection, his "Yes sir!" was as unfailing as the Eveready flashlight advertisement!

Venkat Rao was Balidatta's ideal—at least in matters economic.

After work, Venkat Rao would retire to the modest home which he shared with his wife, old parents and an unmarried sister. In the privacy of his home he would shed his smart office persona and revert to the thrifty householder. A modest lungi[1] round the waist, folded above the knees, unless there were visitors; the simplest of food, cooked by the women of the house—millets in the daytime and rice only at night. No extravagances. Dinner was eaten early, so the lamps did not have to be kept burning: he himself would walk down to the clubhouse and read the newspaper by the light of the petromax.[2] But through all this privation, Venkat Rao managed to keep his poise.

Balidatta would say to his wife: "Saroj, do you think we could be like them?"

And when she smiled, he went on: "Have you seen Venkat Rao's wife? How fresh she looks, even after all that hard work. Just like the flowers in her hair."



"Oh, don't talk about Venkat Rao's wife!" Sarojini snorted. "She's been treasuring up that one sari of hers for the last six years! And the lovely hair you admire so much—only jute braids bought in the market. Yes, she does take pains over the flowers, I admit: she takes them off at night and stores them in a damp cloth, so they look fresh again in the morning."

"How beautifully she sings!" Balidatta said.

"Well, I'm afraid I haven't learnt to show off like her! You should have asked Venkat Rao to find you a wife just like his."

"You turn everything into a joke!" Balidatta complained. "I really wish we could be like them. I wonder why you Oriya women have to spend half your lives in the kitchen. What's so great about that? No wonder the Telugu[3] people tell us: 'Oh, you Oriyas will eat all your money away! Do you have silver

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[1] piece of cloth wrapped around the waist, and which covers the legs, worn by men.

[2] kerosene-lamp which emits very bright light.

[3] the dominant language spoken in Andhra Pradesh, one of the States in southern India. The word also refers to the people who speak the language of that region.

and gold for breakfast?' And what a sight you women make when you walk out of your homes in procession — cheeks puffed up with paan, ornaments jangling, sari ends knotted together. Like animals in the zoo! Why can't you take a few lessons in housekeeping from Venkat Rao's wife? After all, she doesn't live very far off."

Can any wife bear to hear her husband sing the praises of another woman? Sarojini would choke back her tears, and Balidatta would sigh in frustration.

Venkat Rao and Balidatta were close friends. Venkat Rao would offer him coffee and idlis[1], and when he sometimes bought a packet of cigarettes he would share it with Balidatta. They were generally seen together — the tall Venkat Rao and the tiny Balidatta, deep in conversation. And the subject of their conversation never varied: the office and the doings of their officers; who had written what on the files; how things ought to have been written and what was happening to whom. But there was one other topic that they frequently argued over.

Venkat Rao found his entire existence bound and circumscribed by the narrow walls of the office. He had no regrets about this; on the other hand, he congratulated himself on his ability to see things as they really were. And with that unclouded vision, he had computed and compiled the balance sheet of his life: five years from now, what gains could he expect, and what would he be able to achieve? What shape would his world be in then? And ten years on — how would his status have changed? Venkat Rao worked out his sums carefully, never wasting time on self-pity or envy, counting his blessings.

But there was another side to Venkat Rao which the material world of profit and loss had not been able to suppress. It was his interest in the intangible which had led him to the study of palmistry. He had waded through numerous books on the subject by European as well as Indian masters. He was convinced that the changing lines on the palm reflected changes in destiny and that these lines could be made to change through human will and endeavour. And so, Venkat Rao spent a good deal of time in reading the lines on his own palm through a small lens,



[1] little cakes made of rice flour, steamed in metal moulds.

looking for changes to appear in the map of his destiny. Oh, if only that fate line could move away from the Mount of Saturn to the Mount of Venus![1] And if only an island appeared in that vast Sea of Mars[2] in the centre of his palm! What heights he might reach! And Venkat Rao focused all the power of his will onto the lines of his palm: so let it happen, so let it happen!

On meeting someone for the first time, Venkat Rao would immediately observe the lines on the palm. He had memorized the palms of every superior officer in the company, unnoticed by them, and his calculations of their future destinies as well as traits of character had been entered in a notebook, which he consulted regularly. His relationships with others were guided by the entries in that notebook.

Many of his colleagues consulted him, allowing Venkat Rao to practise and sharpen his prophetic skills. But mainly, it was his own future that interested him. He looked forward to the day when every twist of his destiny would stand clearly revealed in the changing lines on his palm.

This was where Balidatta and he disagreed. Balidatta ridiculed him, as he mentally ridiculed everyone with whom he disagreed. To Balidatta, Venkat Rao's art was like the craftsman's skill to the trader: what good is it if it brings no gain, he thought. Venkat Rao should be reading the palms of the officers and the members of their families. What influence this would bring him—and what prosperity! The prospects were dazzling. If only *he* knew how to do it! He *had* tried, but those mysterious lines eluded him. He could only seek vicarious fulfillment.



"Why don't you understand, Venkat Rao?" he would argue. "Who's going to bother if you don't sell yourself? Go to the bosses in the office and read their palms. Will you do this?"

Venkat Rao would only smile. He pitied Balidatta. How can you help someone who refuses to accept the reality of his fate, he thought.

That evening, Balidatta rushed to Venkat Rao's house.

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[1] raised areas of the palm, named after the different planets. (Terms used in palmistry.)

[2] the hollow area in the centre of the palm, also named after a planet.

"Venkat Rao, will you have another look at my palm tomorrow, please? And also look up the earlier predictions in your notebook. Remember — you had said, my time is approaching? Now we're going to test how accurate your predictions are!"

"Very well" Venkat Rao said, smiling. He had heard this before.

## Five

The door and windows were wide open and the shaft of light from the tiny room invaded the darkness, together with the sounds of laughter and animated conversation. The usual city smells were tempered by the fragrance of jasmine and malati[1] flowers, wafted from the tiny garden that bordered the little house. The street was thick with traffic; on the opposite side was a huge, double-storeyed mansion, owned by a wealthy lawyer with political aspirations. A bamboo screen hung in the upper verandah[2], behind which a young girl practised her music lessons. Below, streams of people swirled around the big house: some were seated, while others paced about restlessly. The lawyer could be seen inside the brightly lit building, talking gravely to a group of visitors.



But the tiny house on the other side of the street seemed totally unaware of what was going on here. It proclaimed its own existence, in tones that were entirely different.

Balidatta hesitated as he walked past that little house. He knew it well: his friend and colleague Banabihari Patnaik — Bannu, for short — lived here. But he had colleagues living on every street; if he were to stop at each one's door, all his days and nights would be taken up. He could not afford this unprofitable socializing.

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[1] fragrant flowers that bloom in the evening.

[2] a partially covered space built between the porch and living space of an Indian house. Originally designed to keep the heat away, it is a convenient place to deal with people one does not want to invite into the house.

But Bannu was different. What magic was there in that house? The moment you reached his door you lost your city ways: the simple rustic within you woke up again, though another few steps would quickly put him back to sleep. All around him, the city was in high tide; the retreating waves seemed to drag him along into Bannu's dwelling. All his resolves about not wasting time were swept away. It was as though Nature had suddenly blessed him: poor trapped creature! Be thou uncomplicated for this little moment!

"Balidatta!" Bannu greeted him. "Where have you been all these days? Tunu," he shouted to his servant, "one more cup of tea! Here, have a biri[1]."

"What made you remember us?" Shontu Babu, sipping his tea, asked him in Bengali.

Bannu ran his palms down Balidatta's cheeks in a theatrical gesture of affection. "Poor man! How sun-dried he looks! Did the Sahib beat you up? You poor bastard, don't you know you're supposed to look happy in this house? Laugh, laugh, or else!" Bannu gripped his collar and shook him.



"Oh, let me go, Bannu, you'll tear my shirt!" Balidatta cried. "You're hurting me."

"What did you expect? I won't let you go until you laugh!" Bannu said, tickling him.

And Balidatta was tortured into a laugh. Or rather, the parody of a laugh—so unusual it was to see him contort his gaunt face and lift his dry lips off his teeth.

The sight amused everyone in the room, but still Bannu would not release him. "What! Is that how you laugh when no one is around? Doesn't it scare your little wife?"

"Let me go, you rogue!" Balidatta said.

"All right, that will do," Bannu said. "Now gulp this hot tea down and have a bite of these fried things—and try to laugh between bites." With a playful slap on his back, Bannu pushed him into a chair.

The hot tea and crisp savouries thawed him out and made him loquacious. "You know, Bannu, your style of welcoming

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[1] tobacco wrapped in the dried leaf of a tree. Generally smoked by poorer Indians.

is slightly less refined than that of your dog here, which only scratches and licks! What say you to that, Bannu, you banara?"[1]

"Bull's eye!" Bannu said, laughing loudly at the joke.

"How goes it then, Balidatta?" Shontu Babu asked again.

"Miserably, Shontu da,[2] Balidatta replied. "Troubles never seem to end."

"Troubles? What troubles?" Shontu da asked, as he prepared to listen, with a warm twinkle in his eyes.

The years could roll by, the earth change its appearance, youth turn into old age, but evening after evening Shontu da would be found in Bannu's sitting room—soft-spoken, courteous, balding, face weather-beaten but still handsome.

Shontu da had the same intimate quality as Bannu's little house. One look at him and the measuring scales would drop from your calculating fingers.

He seemed to have no other identity: he was simply Shontu Babu, who could always be found in Bannu's sitting room.

Of course, a few things were broadly known about him. According to Bannu, he was a contractor of sorts, with property and business assets in Darjeeling. Then again, Bannu hinted at a mysterious life that Shontu da had lived: he had travelled widely, but clandestinely, in Europe and North Asia. He had worked as a secret agent in the Himalayan region. He was a reputed marksman and had shot many dangerous assassins. He possessed occult tantric[3] powers ...



Bannu was known to be addicted to novels of mystery and detection and inhabited a private world of wonders. For instance, he would talk of an exotic flower which grew in Australia, on a subterranean tree. At the first rains, when thunder rumbled in the sky, the flower would burst forth and bloom in solitary splendour. It was tales such as these which

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[1] Oriya word derived from "vanara" ( "monkey", in Sanskrit). Here, it is a pun on the name Bannu.

[2] abbreviated form of "dada" ("elder brother", in the Bengali language). Both "da" and "dada" can be used after a person's name, as a mark of respect to someone who is older.

[3] Tantricism is an off-shoot of the Hindu religion. A "tantric" is a worshipper of Shakti, the mother-goddess who symbolises Divine Power. Tantrics are supposed to possess special magical powers, acquired through occult practices.

made Bannu's friends declare that his talk could be discounted by a margin of ninety-nine percent!

But Shontu da was clearly something out of the ordinary: his manners were indication enough of his generous and deep wisdom and rich experience of human nature. His face rarely revealed anything but his eyes were like needles; in arguments, he always had the last irrefutable logic. He seemed to have sublimated the worldly concerns of ordinary people into a higher form of fatalism. When he said, with a deep sigh: "It's all Govinda's will!" the earth seemed suddenly to dissolve and reappear, looking far more intimate and beautiful.

Shontu da's command of Oriya was poor, so he spoke in Bengali or a comical mixture of the two languages. But there was nothing narrow or parochial about him: his humanism overcame all differences of race or language.

Balidatta suddenly remembered: he had to talk to Bannu about the office. What could be more absorbing than the office, the summit of one's professional aspiration, the conquering passion of one's waking hours and the provider of one's daily bread? Yes, nothing could give his mind greater nourishment than a serious discussion of office matters.



"You know, Bannu, today the Sahib ..." he began, but Shontu da's piercing eyes were searching his face. Bannu's lips were curled in contentment around the biri. Two of the others in the room, Jogu and Radhu, were looking at him attentively. Nanda, who had been admiring the beauty of the female form in an illustrated magazine, looked up. Balidatta lost his appetite for discussion and returned to his cup of tea. What strange creatures these are! He thought angrily: how lightly they take life's problems! Not a thought about tomorrow!

This Bannu—you could not help feeling sorry for him. What talents he had, what beautiful handwriting, and what mastery of the English language! How quickly he could grasp a problem and come up with a solution! But he *would* insist on quarrelling with the bosses, returning ten words for each one that he received. Claiming his self-respect had been hurt! As though only he had self-respect and the bosses none! Listen, brother, if you want to serve, you must ... Well, what's the use? Bannu won't listen. He won't ever give up that proud

walk, shoulders high and chest out—as if he was going into battle, instead of to the office!

If only he had Bannu's gifts! He would have tended his bosses with loving care, nursed their trust, won them over with his devotion! What use was hospitality lavished on others? To waste time on idle talk? Or your hard-earned money buying books by the dozen? Once you were in service, the only book you needed was the office manual! But would Bannu listen?

And worst of all—to argue with your bosses; to point out their errors! What madness! To watch the rainclouds gather and keep your umbrella folded! But no, there was no explaining things to Bannu.

If he had had a little sense, Bannu could have become an officer himself. How many had risen, and how many more would rise—but this idiot Bannu would remain where he was!

Bannu claimed descent from a renowned land-owning family, respected even now in the village. But it was precisely his aristocratic temper that was at the root of his problems. All the eminent persons in the state—ministers, businessmen, senior civil servants—were his kinsmen, Bannu declared, trotting out his family tree, if there was any dispute.



What folly this was, this aristocratic vanity, he thought. Who but a fool would dive off the roof in borrowed feathers, just to claim kinship with the birds?

Would it not have been wiser to stand in the shadow of the great, to bend a little, bow a little? But what's the use of talking?

Still, he could never be angry with Bannu. There was magnetism in that tall, slim body—some unknown power inherited from his aristocratic ancestors, which won everybody's sympathy. Even in the confines of that little room, Bannu was a leader of men.

Moreover, he was everybody's unpaid slave. Is there a sick person in your family who needs watching over at night? Do you need something from the market? Any other errands to run? Someone to talk to when you're lonely, to share your troubles? Bannu is ready to help!

If he ran across a friend, his right hand would go automatically to his right pocket and out would come a biri—slim,

half burnt, to be offered to the friend. (Cigarettes were found there once, but times had changed!) And then, out of his left pocket, he would produce a remnant of his aristocratic past — a metal lighter. Click! The biri would be lit, and the chit-chat would begin. The friend would have forgotten what he was doing there in the first place!

Balidatta drained his tea in silence. All the others had emptied their cups; their biris were glowing, and the conversation meandered at will ... the latest news in the papers, politics, literature, and then Shontu da's philosophy.

Unable to follow, Balidatta yawned repeatedly. Piles of books lay scattered in the room. What a waste of time books were! Wrinkling up his nose in disapproval, he was about to rise and leave when he saw a slim, blue-covered book, entitled *How to Write Business Letters*. His eyes lit up, as though he had discovered an essential truth, and he picked up the book eagerly.

Bannu saw him pick up the book and suddenly seemed to be reminded of something. His expression changed. With a last prolonged puff, he flung the half burnt biri across the room and said excitedly: "Do you know what happened in the office today, Shontu da? I was reading a book quietly after finishing my work when that misconceived ape of a Head Clerk came up to me and said: 'There are some urgent files. Attend to them.' There was a wagonload; it would have taken me all night. 'Why me?' I told him, 'This should be done by your favourite son-in-law in the office. I have already done what I was supposed to do. Just because *he* doesn't feel like doing it, that's no reason for you to throw it at my head!' He said: 'The Sahib insists it must be done immediately.'"



"And do you know what I replied? I said: 'Well, is that all you want me to do on behalf of your new son-in-law or is there more to come? In that case, why don't you make *me* your son-in-law?' Ha, ha, ha!"

One of them had talked back! One had expressed what was in the minds of all! Their pent-up rage had found release; everyone in the room had roared with laughter.

Balidatta's eyes lit up unconsciously. He too had joined in the laughter, forgetting for a moment that he was the apostle

of progress. They were all bending forward to listen, as though they would lick away the words the moment they appeared on Bannu's lips. "What happened after that?"

"After that? After that, the piece of sour pickle turned as red as a chili. He said: 'You read books when you should be working, and you talk back when work is given; does the Company pay you for doing nothing?' "

"My hands were starting to itch," Bannu went on. "I lost my temper and told him: 'Get out, or else . . .' "

As the words were spoken, Bannu jumped to his feet in anger, knocking the table over; the empty teacups crashed to the floor. As he picked up the fragments, Bannu muttered: "What does he think of himself? Always trying to boss me around, the rascal!"

Shontu da looked grave but said nothing. Bannu's agitation had raised the temperature of the room. Nanda's breathing quickened, as though Bannu's narrative had touched some raw nerve. Balidatta had begun to slide back into his shell, nervous at Bannu's sudden outburst.

"What happened next, Bannu?" Nanda asked in a hoarse voice.



"Yes, listen," Bannu said. "The office peon, Kunja, came in and said 'The Assistant Manager wants to know what the trouble is.' I said: 'Tell the Assistant Manager we are having a havan[1] here.' The Assistant Manager's father is a priest, you know!"

"Well done!" everyone said.

"Yes, it's easy for you to applaud!" Shontu da said. "It's only crazy Bannu who will have to pay, not you! I tell you, Bannu — this is madness. If you are fed up with your job, give it up; if not, give up these habits."

"This is not you talking, Shontu da — it's the tradition you come from!" Nanda said, still agitated. "Everyone knows, the Bengalis have mastered the arts of the office. The British got to them first and taught them their language. But we Oriyas haven't learnt those skills and so we can't please our bosses!"

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[1] an act of worship performed by Hindus, involving the offering of various kinds of sacrifice to Agni, the God of Fire.

"Well, if you can't, then die!" Shontu da said in exasperation.

"That's not easy either!" Nanda shot back.

"Listen, Nanda," Shontu du said earnestly. He crossed his arms across his chest, inside the folds of his coat. The simple gesture was like the wave of a magician's wand. Everyone was quiet.

"There's more to courage than brute strength! But why is everyone silent?"

Not one of them could return his gaze. Bannu remembered the stories of Shontu da's tantric powers!

"Nanda, it's easy to use harsh words — easier still to be insulting. You are proud of being Oriya; I could boast that I am a Bengali. But aren't we the same clay? Anything will do if one wants to be boastful: you only have to pick up some imaginary quality that makes you feel superior! You could be proud of being blind inspite of your eyes; I could be proud of having eyes to see! But our pride isn't going to make the crops grow! You say the Bengalis[1] know how to serve their masters — true! If you had been in their situation and got a hundred-year start, you could have learnt it just as well, instead of crying sour grapes! These are economic problems; raising narrow, provincial slogans isn't going to make a Gopabandhu Das[2] out of you or a Chittaranjan Das[3] out of me! Let's drop this talk. Anyway, Bannu — don't worry. No harm will come to you. Good night!"



"Neat!" Bannu said to himself, tapping his forehead with three fingers. The scenario came from one of his beloved detective novels: the great Sexton Blake had just paid off his cockney cab driver in a dingy London street.

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[1] the people of Bengal, in the eastern part of India, whose language is Bengali. Bengal was among the parts of India which the British occupied earliest, and as a result, English education came to Bengal much earlier than it did to the other "provinces" of India, giving the people of Bengal an advantage over other Indians.

[2] a leader of the Indian movement for political freedom from British rule (late 19th and early 20th century), an Oriya. Sometimes referred to as the "father" of modern Orissa.

[3] another leader of the Indian struggle for independence, also a Bengali, and among the foremost lawyers in the country.

But inside the room, the excitement was still high.

Balidatta sat quietly, looking injured and slightly disgusted. He was a stranger to the world of argument and debate.

"I've never seen Shontu da so excited," Radhu said. "Really, Nanda, you shouldn't have spoken to him like that!"

"I'm not sorry!" Nanda said. "I've no quarrel with Shontu da personally—it's his clansmen I was referring to. They make fun of us, they mock everyone, but they come here and take the best jobs, the best landed properties! Now they've even invaded our office! The new Assistant Manager in the office, for example . . ."

"Oh, Nanda, it's only a bread feud," Bannu said. "It's because there is just one handful of rice in the pot for so many mouths!"

His voice had grown unusually soft. It was not the defiant Bannu who, only a moment ago, had raged at the establishment; some humane voice from his aristocratic past had taken over. "What a mess we've made of this beautiful land!"

He was his normal self in another moment. "Here, Nanda," he said, "have a biri. Cool off. Have you seen today's newspaper? It's there, on the cot."



And through clouds of acrid biri fumes he went on: "If you idiots can't come out of your dung heaps and stop quarrelling over your provincial barriers[1] what'll happen to this country? Who is going to claim India?"

## Six

The assembly broke up. Suddenly, everyone seemed to have regained the awareness of time. The political issues, the country's problems[2]—these had been only a diversion from the one inescapable truth, invasions on the solemn business of living.

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[1] under British rule, India was divided into a number of "provinces", each possessing a different language and culture. There was often intense rivalry and prejudice among the people belonging to neighbouring provinces.

[2] the reference is mainly to India's struggle for independence.

Looming large in every consciousness were the hands of the office clock, pointing to the hour when their lives would echo once again to familiar tunes.

Bannu shut and bolted the door. The end of another waking day ... The chairs were scattered untidily about the room; soiled teacups on the bed, pages of the newspaper strewn around, books everywhere, biri stubs all over the floor ... He would have to tidy up.

There was a tall chest of drawers in the room, another relic of the dead past. On top of it stood a teak bookshelf, which housed his sets of *Encyclopaedia Brittanica* and the *Book of Knowledge.*

A mirror hung over the drawers and next to it was a photograph of his wife and himself.

As was his habit, Bannu scanned his face in the mirror and started to comb his hair. Thoughts crowded in on him: the newspaper vendor hadn't been paid for four months, the teashop across the street would soon issue the first reminder. The waters were rising, soon his debts would rise to nose level. His wife Shefali, pregnant now, had to cook, sweep, wash utensils and care for the children.



What had he given her in ten years of marriage? A single ornament? One expensive sari? With a little support from him, she could have been a radiant goddess, but she was reduced to scrubbing floors and dirty dishes in a tattered sari. The delicate blossom had wilted.

Now Bannu could see, above the broad forehead reflected in the mirror, the shadows of dark clouds. And beyond that, the gilt lettering on the spines of the black volumes: the *Book of Knowledge.*

"*Book of Knowledge*! Damn!" Bannu cried. And striding angrily into the courtyard, he shouted to his wife: "Bring my dinner!"

## Seven

Making his way alone through the darkness, Balidatta was angry with himself. Why had he wasted his time? He was angry with Bannu as well. The more he thought about it, the more agitated he became. He thought of his own problems, his goals, of Venkat Rao on the one hand, and Bannu on the other. The future was clear: one would definitely get what one deserved! Yes, there were times when calculations could be confused by arguments, other times when unseen powers seemed to rule events. But not for long. A determined person, such as himself, could take his fate into his own hands — could calculate exactly what destiny owed him, both principal and interest.

Bannu was using his axe to strike at his own roots. How was destiny to blame?



As he walked with small, hurried steps, Balidatta began to traverse the course of his own future. He suddenly felt magnified; his head did not quite reach up to the sky, but the sky had bent low to touch it! The stars were like white flowers; the earth was spread out like a carpet. He marched triumphantly to his destiny on inexorable feet — crushing, pulverising everything. And there, by the roadside, slinking in the undergrowth, drooping, lay Bannu — fawning, hoping to catch his eye. Balidatta was the boss of his bosses. The ultimate boss! No, he would show no pity, do no favours. Do your duty! Balidatta was suddenly speaking in the Sahib's voice — ruthless, efficient.

Ha! Ha! Ha! Balidatta roared with laughter.

What intoxication! In a moment, he could be Alexander, Napoleon, Hitler — anything! Or the President of the United States? From *Log Cabin to White House* — that was the name of the book he had won as a school prize once.

But his would be a very special White House! An immense office, of which he was master. Row upon row of typewriters, whose staccato clatter drummed out the rhythms of his victory.

And as he walked across the office, people bowed like ripening stalks of paddy. And then — the balloon was soaring now — his fame and titles had increased! Houses and lands, as far as the eye could travel! Carriages and motor cars.

But his fantasies brought him no sense of well-being, no joy. Perhaps because he was a stranger to these feelings.

It would all come, in due time. When the bamboo sapling grew, the bridge would grow strong as well.

Suddenly, coming at him with measured, determined steps, looming menacingly out of the darkness, was a giant. A policeman! Oh God! Why? Poor, innocent Balidatta; junior company clerk, far removed from any political activity, incapable of theft, larceny or petty crime. Two thick arms reached out. Balidatta shook like a drowning rat, his face streaming with sweat, his voice gone. Two pincer-like hands grabbed his neck and a large face slid out of the darkness towards his own, as though about to take a bite. And then, a rock-like fist came crashing down on his back.

"Rascal! Why are you shaking like that? Have you been doing something illegal? Well, you can't get out of my hands now; this is *my* beat, you understand!"



"Raju, it's you! What a ruffian you've become!"

"I was always one, wasn't I? Why, Balidatta, you are shaking! Scared? All right, come, lean on me. You can always count on me — though I understand you are a big man now!"

Balidatta was seething with irritation, but he would have to be careful not to offend Raju who was a childhood friend — but those memories of childhood were now only a blush on the prickly cheeks of time. He didn't dare tell Raju off to his face; there was no knowing how he would retort, the rascal!

This Raju — the rich landlord's son, now a police constable! Carefully picking his words, he said: "Well, Raju? How does the landlord's offspring like being a constable?"

"To hell with the landlord's offspring!" Raju said. "In the police, everyone is a *lord*!"

"Have you been promoted to jamadar[1] yet? I thought you were posted to some village, have you been transferred here?" asked Balidatta.

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[1] the equivalent of corporal in the army or police.

"That's right," Raju replied. "Who cares whether I'm promoted or not? You know, my forefathers blew away our lands and I blew away any chance of landing a decent job. But if there was one thing I'd inherited it was this imposing personality. Even the Big Boss is impressed! So, now I have cashed in on my appearance! But what progress have you made? You look chubby, like a baby football! I say, Balidatta, stay — don't go away! Have you made a killing in the blackmarket?"

"Still the same old vagabond Raju!" Balidatta said.

"It's too late to reform, brother," Raju said. "Now my only contacts are with thieves and blackmarketers. Anyway, its nice meeting you after all these years. The way you were rushing off in the dark, I thought you were upto some mischief! A policeman's suspicious mind, you know! How things have changed, Bali! Anyway, let it go!"

"Well, I'm glad to see you so happy with your job," Balidatta said. "Everyone else seems to be complaining. But even a petty constable's job ..."

"Oh, there's nothing petty about being a constable," Raju said. "It's a job, like any other. *You've* got to wipe your boss's shoes, *I've* got to salute — that's all!"



"Really, Raju, I admire your spirit! Still the same Raju, after all that you've been through! I'm beginning to venerate you, Raju."

"Good! Bow down and touch my feet then! Your ancestors spent their lives bowing and scraping to mine, so what's new about that? Anyway, don't waste your sympathy on me, you'll have enough sorrows of your own."

"My sorrows ?"

"No escape, is there? No matter how great you are! Up and down, down and up, coming and going, going and coming ... sorrows, problems, troubles!"

"Oh brother, let go my hands," Balidatta said. "You're hurting me! Anybody would think you were teaching me artificial respiration!"

"Right you are!" Raju said. "Artificial respiration is just what you need! The world being what it is, what you learned babus[1]

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[1] educated gentlemen.

have made it, breathing has become impossible! There's no joy left . . . nothing but business, and more business."

"Oh, I say," Balidatta exclaimed. "What have we here—a poet-constable?"

"A poet, yes, but with no one to inspire my poetry, now that you're gone," Raju said.

"Really, your words are like poetry! " Balidatta said.

"Not surprising. My ancestors were poets, you know. Anyway—that's all over. Well, I must be off. Duty calls! Take care of yourself, Bali, and I hope you'll never forget your friend."

"Good bye!" Balidatta said.

"To hell with that!" Raju shouted, marching off, boots thundering majestically.

The aristocrat's son, now a constable! A childhood swaddled in love, lands auctioned off to meet family debts—nothing left of that inheritance but the towering, muscular frame and the princely temperament. The impulse to command, passed down through generations, had not died. And so he had joined the police force!



Memories of Raju's opulence. And now this?

No, there was nothing to be done. No one could save him now.

Balidatta walked home with hurried steps.

But something ached inside him. Balidatta thought—Raju had not lost his smile! The old proportions had not changed. Raju was still his better!

## Eight

Suddenly, the parallel lines of Venkat Rao's astrology and Balidatta's destiny were going to meet! That morning, Venkat Rao had told him: "Balidatta, have some sweets ready!" Everyone knew—there was only one senior post dangling above all their heads. Venkat Rao, Balidatta and many others were competing for it. Was Venkat Rao making a correct prediction?

Having told him the good news, Venkat Rao scrutinised the hollow in his own right palm through the lens and furiously scrubbed the black spot at the base of his thumb, his face downcast. He looked up at Balidatta's question and smiled.

"Correct?" he said. "Yes, I think so—if this science is correct!"

Balidatta's hand shook as he pulled the last stick out of Venkat Rao's packet of cheap cigarettes and lit it. The tide was turning!

Not long ago, one afternoon ...

The Sahib's orders had taken him by surprise: Balidatta was to accompany him on tour. Only the Sahib and he, in the Sahib's great big motorcar. Balidatta's head reeled.

He had taken a long look at himself in the pane of glass in the office door. The open door, with the darkness of the wall behind it, had turned into a mirror, revealing everything. His teeth were free of paan stains, but his tongue was dyed red[1]. He scraped it clean with his front teeth; scrubbed the sweat on his forehead, the grime behind his ears, the little pimples on his nose; whisked the dust off his clothes. Everything done in desperate hurry. One last look, and with a fervent "Ma Kali! Protect me!" he rushed off.



The Sahib was in the driver's seat, his hands on the steering wheel. On the rear seat, tongue protruding, lolled the Sahib's almighty Alsatian. Perturbed, Balidatta walked restlessly from one side of the car to the other, not knowing what to do. For one brief moment the Sahib looked back, and he quickly bent low and snapped a brisk salute; but immediately, the Sahib turned his head away. What was he to do? How should he draw the Sahib's attention? Cough? Scrape the ground with his shoes? What if the Sahib became angry? The motorcar's engine purred like a cat. What misfortune! Were heaven's doors going to slam shut after one tantalising glimpse? Or were those already inside the compartment trying to push him off just as he was about to board the express train? Seconds passed like ages.

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[1] chewing paan turns the mouth and tongue red, because of the presence of the vegetable dye (cathechu) in the paan. (See note on paan, Chapter 1)

But the sun shone once again. The Head Clerk passed on a pile of papers into the Sahib's hand; the Sahib turned around with a fierce glare, and the nervous Balidatta stooped to salaam again. The Sahib pointed at the rear seat and barked: "Get in!"

The car lurched off while Balidatta was still climbing on. The door was half open, and he clung to it for dear life. The end was near! Then suddenly, the Sahib's angry glance took in the situation. One tug of the brawny left hand and click! the door was shut.

Balidatta surveyed the scene. That terrible dog—more like a domesticated tiger—glared at him with enormous bloodshot eyes, opening cavernous jaws to reveal dripping teeth and glistening tongue. A low, solemn rumbling issued from its throat. Balidatta felt his blood drying up. The cry of terror rising within him, the full-throated, instinctive, primitive cry that could have made his heart lighter, was choked into a feeble groan—the soundless, terrified whimper of some tiny jungle creature. The dog grew even more excited. But now that deep roar travelled to the front seat. Without turning his head the Sahib shouted: "Shut up, Dick!"



This was all the prompting that Dick the Alsatian needed. His growling ceased; but now he was in a friendly mood, which he *had* to express. Thrusting his gigantic head forward, he sniffed Balidatta from head to toe. Then he deposited one enormous paw on Balidatta's lap, staining his spotless trousers, and went to sleep contentedly.

A compromise, Balidatta thought. Danger was never far away. His mind yearned to fly off into the clouds, but something was there to tug him by the hair and warn him: You are here!

But for this one flaw, his mind was soaring like a kite. The car rolled on. The crowds parted to let the car through, and on all sides people were bowing low in obeisance, awe stamped on their faces. Balidatta's acquaintances stared at him in disbelief; even those who had always looked at him with contempt were showing respect. How different the world looked from a speeding car! The same roads, the same by-lanes, shops and houses: when you trudged past them, they seemed to crush you with their weight! But if you were riding in a carriage,

how different they were; how different, once again, seen from a motorcar, and how entirely different when you looked at them from a running train! Like a moving inn.

The onlooker's vision is altered by the elevation of his seat and the speed of locomotion; his feelings change; his entire being participates in the experience. Even a slight change in the setting will do the trick: move the table a little or turn the lantern down, and everything will appear utterly different!

How wonderful! Balidatta thought. No physical intoxication could have inflated his mind so completely. During the first half-hour of his ride, he had found himself looking down on a puny world from an immeasureable height. But in the second half-hour, the euphoria was replaced by a compassionate vision, a panoramic appraisal of the new world unfolding before him — as though he had burst through that four-foot-nine-inch frame and was sprouting like a young teak sapling. He could forget his own sorrows and empathise with the pain of others.

This Sahib in front of him: how mighty he was, and how pitiable! Why had he drowned himself so completely in his horse, his dog and his whisky? How lonely he looked! When he was absorbed in work, he was like a machine; but when work was done, he was unable to look the world in the face. Only the other day, he had aimed his shot-gun at the pile of papers stacked mountain-high on his desk and was about to pull the trigger. The Memsahib had snatched the weapon away, or else! The Sahib's old bearer, who had narrated everything, had rushed to the rescue. Had it just been the whisky? Or was it his growing disenchantment with life which had peeped out of the gun barrel?



And the Memsahib? Was it here that the tangled webs of the Sahib's mind could be unravelled? God alone knows! But amid a crowd of friends, she would dance the night away, balanced on the Sahib's arm.

And drink! What a state she had been in, that night, when the old bearer had lifted her up, like a child, half undressed, and carried her to her bed!

Like a picture she was! And like a picture she appeared, and disappeared. The hot summers were spent in the hills

of Darjeeling or Ooty and she wintered on the racetracks of Bombay or Calcutta. Like a migrating bird, she flew back and forth, alone.

How strange was this triumphant world in which they lived!

Their two children were in Britain. The old father reared sheep in some English village and angled for fish when he had the time.

A brother had migrated to Africa and become a planter.

Sisters? Yes, there was a sister, the bearer had told him. She had been a singer in a nightclub in Germany, but was now a clergyman's wife in Hong Kong.

Truly a triumphant world! The entire globe was their home.

Their struggles never ceased. Time and again, wars had broken out; bombs had flattened their homes and fresh, budding youths had been sacrificed. But that tenacious civilisation, greedy for survival, had picked itself out of the mud, the blood, the ruins of war. The clarion sounded: "Onward! March on! Hip, hip, hurrah! God save the King!"

Why then was the Sahib so tired and sad?



Balidatta's heart overflowed with tenderness; he wished he could draw the Sahib's sorrows out and drink them up, soothe his cares away—like the loving mother, like the doting wife, like the faithful slave.

The tide of consciousness was suddenly interrupted. The Sahib was muttering to himself in a harsh undertone; Balidatta bent forward to hear, but the sound had ceased. Something had irritated him.

Now Balidatta's awareness had backtracked: he could feel nothing but pride, for himself.

In front of them, barring the way, was another motorcar, not allowing them to pass. Seated next to the driver, enormous pigtail waving in the air, string of rough beads round his neck, red cloth container of paan leaves clutched tightly in his left hand, was an elderly man, gesticulating vigorously, urging the driver on: "Faster! Faster!"

It was Bhobani Sahu—brick-kiln owner and contractor. He sat atop a pyramid of gold, having sold tent-pegs to the army during the war. A rupee a peg. Neo-rich. Still put his thumb print on contract papers. Wears a short dhoti.

A victor in the war for the daily bread.

What could frighten him?

Oblivious to the Sahib's hooting klaxon, Bhobani Sahu's car flew over the dusty road weaving drunkenly from side to side.

The Sahib had turned red. He was biting the nails on his free hand.

"Hey, Babu!" he said to Balidatta, without turning his head. "Have you noted the number of that car?"

Balidatta rattled off not only the number but every detail of Bhobani Sahu's life history, as though it was all inscribed on the number plate. What could the Sahib gain by noting the car's number anyway? He was not the government—only the Company boss. But how did that matter to Balidatta? He had been asked a question and had known all the answers! Mother Kali be praised!

"H'm!" the Sahib commented. "Well, write it down!"

Bhobani Sahu has got it coming! But why did the Sahib look worried?

Again, the same suspicion, the same disbelief.

Bhobani Sahu raced on, raising clouds of dust.



The mercury in Balidatta's thermometer took a sudden dip. He was no victor: he was merely Balidatta, a nobody, an insignificant ant picking up the crumbs of daily bread.

How some people had risen!

Those who had been gulping the vacant air by the riverbank were now on the topmost branches. Oh!

The dog was fast asleep, with half its carcass loaded on Balidatta's lap.

He remembered his old father. The moment he saw a dog he would yell: "Get me a stick! Beat that dog; it's going to touch me! It's going to defile[1] me!"

With a sigh Balidatta reclined against the seat cushion.

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[1] to an orthodox Hindu the dog is an unclean animal, and a person considers himself defiled or made unclean by its touch.

# Nine

It was evening.

Tired after the day's work, Balidatta rattled the door handles impatiently and a smiling Sarojini appeared, in freshly laundered sari and blouse.

"Mr. Mohapatra had come," she said.

"Mohapatra? Which Mohapatra?" he asked.

"As if you don't know!" she said. "Don't pretend! *Your* Mr. Mohapatra — the one you are always talking about! The Second Sahib or Junior Sahib or some Sahib, I'm not sure which. He said you're to go and meet him."

"*He* had come? Really? Are you sure? What more did he say?"

"Oh ma! I was in my torn sari, sweeping the house, when I saw a man on the verandah outside. He asked 'Is Balidatta Babu back?' I was paralysed with fright! He said 'I'm Mr. Mohapatra' — the something Sahib, he added. Then he asked 'Is nobody home? I'm thirsty.' I thought, can this man be a Sahib? Is he blind or what? I went inside, changed, and when I looked again there he was still! Marching up and down like a sentry. He must be really thirsty, I thought. I picked up courage, squeezed a lemon into a glass, added some water and crept along the wall to the front door. Then I reached my hand out and put the glass down on the verandah. He drank it in one gulp and said 'Why don't the two of you come and visit us? When Balidatta Babu is home please ask him to see me. There is some urgent matter, about his job.' But tell me, do all your Sahibs have cat's eyes? They seem to burn in the dark!"



Everything was narrated accurately. Including the cats' eyes.

What she had left out was a minor, unnecessary detail. Having drunk the water Mr. Mohapatra had said "How fragrant the water is!" Ma! Who ever heard of water being fragrant? And then, being a careful man, he had returned the glass to her

hand instead of putting it down on the floor. "I'm afraid it may break," he had said, and the firm pressure of one fingertip had made her tingle. Of course, he had gripped the tumbler hard when returning it to her, lest it should fall.

Balidatta was disturbed by what he heard. A dark cloud had crept into his mind: it was the sight of fish that made the cat's eyes glow! But how happy Sarojini looked—her feet scarcely touched the ground! It must be the thought of her husband's success that had gladdened her; after all, they were one soul! Mr Mohapatra had asked to see him about the job; it could only mean a promotion was in the offing—it was bound to be! Had not Venkat Rao told him? His job! Everything about it was beautiful. How beautiful his wife was! What more could a man wish for when he got home? Fresh, clean and well-dressed. Or else—hands caked with cowdung plaster[1], face black with kitchen soot, dry unkempt hair coated with ashes from the hearth—chhi[2]! Sarojini smelt of perfume: it was the face cream that she used so sparingly.

Today must be a special day.

Jupiter, his ruling planet, was in the seventh house.[3]



Where was the dark cloud now? The tide was roaring in over the stone embankments, ripping his entire being to shreds.

He would have to visit Mr. Mohapatra—he, and Sarojini.

Suddenly, he felt he needed her. The right of possession asserted itself. Sarojini was entirely his; she belonged to nobody else.

He was the master—here, in the gathering darkness, in the privacy of his own home.

"What's this? Oh, I say!" Sarojini cried. Was it pleasure, or distaste?

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[1] the cow is a sacred animal to Hindus, and even its dung and urine are supposed to have purifying and cleaning properties. In the villages, people in mud huts use a mixture of cowdung and water to wash the floors every morning. This chore is performed by the women of the house, whose hands, therefore, get covered with cowdung. Here, the expression refers contemptuously to a woman who is rustic and uneducated.

[2] "Shame!" an expression of disgust.

[3] it is believed in astrology that a person's fate is determined by the position of the planets at the time of birth, particularly the position of the dominant or "ruling" planet.

# Ten

"Come, we're getting late," Balidatta said. He had hurriedly put on his visiting clothes—white trousers and shirt. He wiped his face with a wet towel and patted his hair into place. Sarojini idly prepared a paan for herself, feeling no desire to go. "I don't think we should go tonight," she said. "It's quite late already. What time will it be when we get home?"

"But he's expecting us, you know," he said.

"Well, *you* go. Now tell me, if they expect us to visit them, why don't they send their car to pick us up? They do have a car, don't they?"

"Pray to your gods," he said. "You'll soon be riding in your own car! Come, let's go. Comb your hair."



"I already have!" she said.

"Come then—no more talk."

Five minutes later, she let him know she was ready. "All right, let's go," she said, yawning.

"What's this?" he said, looking at her. "Why haven't you put on your best sari?"

"It's at the washerman's," she replied.

"And slippers? Aren't you going to put them on?"

"Oh, stop making a fuss. Let's go if we have to—I've lots of work to do."

"You know, Saroj" he said, "work will never end. But what's *not* work is what makes life enjoyable!"

He was pleased with what he had just said. What a wise thought!

They locked the front door and walked out.

The familiar road looked so new! What wonderful things lay ahead? Trembling with anticipation, Balidatta was chattering away—boasting, joking, answering his own questions, as though conversing with himself.

Sarojini walked in silence, like a cow being herded. She felt tired, dejected. Life was a three-legged race for her: she would have to stumble, rise again, and keep going.

Mr Mohapatra's spacious home lay in front of them; Balidatta's spirits soared as hers drooped. She was shrinking within herself: what identity did she have here? But Balidatta seemed impervious to the situation. The gates were closed. These gates — they were the icons of a familiar world; a world of degrees and hierarchies, responsibilities and loyalties. Seen through this distorting lens, life was filled with new shapes. Two sturdy moss-covered pillars, and between them, painted over with tar, the long wooden frames with their upright supports. Life bared its black-stained teeth in a fixed, humourless grin. Beyond those gates Balidatta sensed the incarnation of himself that he knew so well — the cringing Balidatta: twisted, not straight; diminished and shrunken, not enlarged. That stooped body, the lowered head; the two nervous fingers that ploughed a furrow through the thinning hair; the furtive, eternally grateful look; the hushed, panicked voice; the row of crooked teeth, gaping only slightly, opening and closing, opening and closing, in a kind of smile. There was no bravery there — only the effortless servility of those who must fight for their daily bread.



Balidatta stopped. On the outside, things were changing rapidly; but within, nature seemed to be putting on defensive armour.

"Is this Mr. Mohapatra's house?" Sarojini asked. "Let's go in — why stand outside?"

"Wait," Balidatta said. "I've got to urinate!" His voice sounded as a though a lid had dropped over it. Sarojini looked around curiously. These changes in her husband's personality were a closed book to her. She was thinking: so this is where he lives! When that glass was being returned ...

For shame!

This was her husband, her pride and joy.

But human skin is not stone. It responds to the touch.

A woman's mind does not need gross experience to create its hidden images and thoughts: its perceptions are subtle.

This was an image of a restless, parched, deprived human being. Truly, his thirst was great!

One could only feel pity.

So this was where he lived, with his wife and children. What was she like? Sarojini wondered.

There was a certain audacity in her walk as she followed her husband.

## Eleven

Later that night, at about eight-thirty bare-bodied, except for an oil-stained lungi round the waist, a man paced up and down the front verandah. On one open palm rested a big lump of black gudakhu[1] — foul-smelling tobacco paste in a raw sugar base. He was scrubbing his teeth with it, using his index finger as a brush. A stream of incoherent sounds, like someone babbling in his sleep, issued from the mouth filled with saliva and gudakhu; someone in the adjoining room, where a bright light was on, repeated his words in an obedient voice.



"Stupid fool!" the lungi-clad person shouted at the other man. "Can't you take down what I say? There's no hope of promotion for you. Do you think the Company pays you to do nothing? Write faster now!"

Balidatta arrived with his wife.

"Who's there? Who is standing there in the dark? Gopal!" — to the servant — "Didn't I tell you not to let anyone in? I'm busy! I'll fix you, you idiot!"

And he went on: "What do you want? Meet me in the office — I don't meet anyone at home."

"Sir ..." Balidatta managed to say.

"Oh, it's you, Balidatta. Who's that with you?"

"Sir, the family[2] is here," Balidatta said.

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[1] a mixture of molasses (raw sugar) and tobacco, used as a kind of tooth-paste by many people in Orissa.

[2] here, the word "family" refers to the wife alone. Among orthodox Hindus, it is considered immodest to refer to one's wife; hence the use of "family" as a euphemism.

"Oh, I see! Please come, please come inside — I'll show you the way. This is a lucky day for us! I'm so sorry, all this work is enough to make one blind. This way, please! Gopal, bring a light, will you?"

Mr Mohapatra led the way and Sarojini followed him into the house. Balidatta peeped into the office room.

"Oh, hello, Binoy Babu! Working so late?" he said. "Well, you've seen everything with your own eyes, Balidatta Babu, what is there for me to say?" Binoy Babu said wearily. "I've not been home since ten this morning. Couldn't even go for a shit! God knows when the dictation will end! I can't make out what he is saying through that gudakhu! Mind you, it's just as difficult to understand the Sahib's dictation when he's got his pipe in his mouth. But those are foreign sounds — you can make a pretty good guess! But English from an Oriya mouth, and that too when it's full of gudakhu — my Pitman's shorthand cannot cope! Anyway, it's just my luck! Let's have a paan, Balidatta Babu. Oh — I heard you'd accompanied the Sahib in his motorcar? What happened? There's no stopping you now, Balidatta Babu — you're going to shoot up!"



Mr Mohapatra was returning. Balidatta turned away, wiping his face, as though he knew nothing. Binoy Babu picked up his shorthand pad.

"We haven't finished" Mr. Mohapatra said. "Binoy Babu, you go home now. I don't think you can manage this. Balidatta, come here, will you? Your shorthand is fast — you can finish this in no time. What a nuisance some of these people are! Come, Balidatta, let's complete these letters! Oh, I'd been to your house today. We'll talk about that later — work first! Now, write!"

He spat out the last of the gudakhu: the dictation went smoothly.

Balidatta was writing.

The clock struck nine. Then half-past. He was still writing.

He had come on a visit!

He had forgotten to ask what Mr Mohapatra wanted to see him about. All he could think of now was: these letters will have to be typed tomorrow.

The hand was busy. But the mind was dead.

# Twelve

Meanwhile, Sarojini . . .

One touch of reality had been enough to awaken her. First, the cordiality of Mr Mohapatra's welcome . . . and then his outburst of unnatural courtesy! Like water poured over blazing coals, it only raised clouds of steam but gave no relief.

How does one get out of this place, she thought.

Mr. Mohapatra led her on: "This way, please!" Hurried words, hurried footsteps! All men are cowards, she thought; the difference is only in degree. Like an animal to the slaughter, she was being dragged.

Mr Mohapatra pushed the door open and stepped into the courtyard. "Can you hear me?" he shouted, "Balidatta Babu's family has come." With that brief announcement, he left.



Sarojini stood there, looking around. She could see no one. But voices could be heard in the kitchen, at one end of the courtyard. The children's study was at the other end. In yet another room two or three young children were engaged in boisterous play. The doors were open; the lights were on; she could see what the house contained—beds, mattresses, cupboards, shelves. . . . A wealthy, abundant household! What was she doing here?

The children, still playing, ran into the courtyard, saw the stranger, stood there dumbly for a moment and rushed back to their mother. The old maidservant emerged from the kitchen, muttering to herself "Visitors at this hour!" And in another moment, they had all emerged: the children, the mistress of the house, the cook, the servant, the maid. A mass display!

"Who?" the lady of the house asked.

"I have come visiting," Sarojini replied, faintly.

A distinct lack of enthusiasm at the other end. This late hour, and unknown visitors: they did not match.

"Who has come with you?" the lady asked.

"*He*[1] has come, but they are talking in the outer room!"

"Oh, he's with our Sahib?"

"Yes."

"Oh, all right, come inside then. Bring a mat, will you? Will you have a paan? Plain, or tobacco? Get my paan box! Where do you live? Why didn't you come a little earlier? I can hardly go out or meet anybody — the work never ends in this house! How many children? Oh, you're just a girl yourself, isn't that so? Which village are your parents from? And your in-laws? What vegetables have you cooked for dinner today?"

She ran out of questions.

The lady of the house sat with legs firmly crossed. What's so special about her? Sarojini thought. She saw an ordinary woman, run down with repeated child-bearing and household work. One would not even notice her if she had lived in a smaller house. Gold-plating on top of the bones and a certain affectation of speech — that's all! That's all she has to match her position. She has learnt how to sound patronising!

The servant had received secret orders, and now he was back with particulars of their identity. Mrs Mohapatra went into the kitchen, pretending there was something that needed her attention, and got the information.



"The children are getting restless," she said, rising. "I've got to go." She left.

There was the maidservant to keep her company.

"What does your husband do? So he works under our Sahib? How much money does he get?"

Even *that* exchange of sorrows and joys was interrupted.

"Hey, Malli!" the mistress threatened from within. "Are you washing the utensils or just gossiping?"

And now Sarojini was alone. The mistress was absorbed in housework. How much longer, how much longer?

The entire household was busy. But what was she doing here? Who *was* she?

Yes, she was someone. She had her place, in the crowd, in life's carnival. She had a form, a shape, a home, a certain purpose.

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[1] a Hindu woman is not supposed to address or refer to her husband by name. The wife refers to her husband as "he".

What *was* her purpose? Within the privacy of her mind, life's meaning had turned to dust. Her entire being, diminished beyond recognition, looked in vain for a place to hide its face.

She had no place here. Was she then only an onlooker? Trying to get a grip on life, only to find, each time, that it had slipped away, leaving her empty handed! She was nothing—a mere lampwick that flamed red for a moment and then turned into black, reeking soot. That was her identity.

She was dying to go, but could not. The path was barred. The web of circumstances, the constraints of her birth—these blocked the way.

She could only draw in deep breaths and look around in anguish. Ask her gods to help. Blame somebody else for her misfortune and abuse *him* to her heart's content.

She stared with eyes that did not see, swimming breathlessly in the maelstrom of feelings. She had been ignored, humiliated. She reviled Mr. Mohapatra mentally, then her husband, then her own stupidity.

It was about eleven thirty when she heard, from one of the inner rooms: "Oh! You are still here?" The door opened and Mrs Mohapatra emerged. "Oh dear! They have kept you waiting so long? They *are* busy. My goodness, who can wait so long? Gopal! Are you there? Go and tell your Sahib.



"You can go now," she said, turning to Sarojini. "They will rise now, I think. Gopal, show her out; it's dark. Very well, go. But come again!"

Gopal was leading her out. She came out into the open and stood there, waiting. The servant was speaking to Mr. Mohapatra.

Mr. Mohapatra got up, irritated.

"These women! They won't let you work in peace! We could easily have done one more letter. Very well, Balidatta. You can go now—it seems to be getting late. Take these with you, and type them out tomorrow."

He shut and bolted the door, ignoring Balidatta's namashkar.[1]

They were returning home in the dark.

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[1] term of greeting which can be used at any time of the day. Also used when taking leave of someone.

"You were so late?" She could not say more.

"You can see for yourself!" he replied, loosening his cramped limbs.

No more words were spoken.

The rebellious thoughts that arose in each were muted—by resignation in one, and prudence in the other.

## THIRTEEN

Balidatta jumped out of bed and turned immediately, before he had even washed his face, to the notes he had scribbled the night before. No poet could be more thrilled by his own creation: this was the very poetry of life!

Every morning, the sun rises on the same humdrum world; but every living creature has to scrounge together the bits and pieces it needs for its happiness. Each one has different needs, different tastes. Happiness comes in many forms.



With his precious files tucked under his arm, Balidatta rushed to the office. It was ten thirty when the last letter was typed.

Sarojini had reminded him that there were no vegetables in the house.

What did it matter?

Steaming lumps of rice, smothered in hot daal[1] one potato—boiled and mashed; a pinch of salt and two red-hot chilies. That was all one needed, Balidatta thought. Which was more important—food, or the sheer joy of success?

Let there be no vegetables—let there be nothing! Let the firewood be damp, let the hearth be choked up! He would pull on his clothes, gulp his food down somehow and rush off to work.

And then the sigh of relief, when he looked at the office clock!

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[1] a kind of soup, prepared from lentils (beans), which is mixed with boiled rice to form a staple Indian food.

## Fourteen

The start of another day.

First, he must go and see Mr. Mohapatra.

There he was, at his desk: black shoes, one worn-out sole slightly agape, laces undone, red socks, yellow trousers, faded blue shirt and striped coat of vaguely pink hue. Striped red and blue tie, loosely knotted; thick-rimmed glasses, face greasy with cold cream and unruly reddish hair reeking of perfumed oil. His shod feet rested on the desk; a writing pad in which he was writing something in a large, careful hand lay in his lap. Also on the desk, next to his shoes, was a crooked, knotted walking-stick, beside which lay his enormous box of betel leaves.

To Balidatta, each powerful man was an incarnation who, properly worshipped, could reward the devotee. This Mr. Mohapatra: in him was incarnated one particular aspect of human nature — Man in his assertive, defiant manifestation. He confronted the whole world with the soles of his shoes! A wise man, a man of the world; skilled at chess, bridge, gambling, homeopathy[1] and astrology; expert in the office arts as well as socialising. A man of tact. Capable of mastering any skill that he turned his mind to. A wise man! But his wisdom took on a special form: to the world at large, it was like that crooked walking-stick!



Bannu would ridicule him. "Poor Balidatta! Always praying to the wrong gods. If you worship Vishnu,[2] you'll go to heaven; but what'll you gain by chanting 'Mohapatra, Mohapatra'?"

Balidatta would stick out his tongue in embarrassment and alarm. "Speak softly, Bannu! Someone may hear you! Do you know what a wise man he is?"

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[1] a system of medicine said to have been founded by Hahnemann, a German chemist, which is very popular in India as it makes use of cheap medicines.

[2] Vishnu, the Supporter and Protector of the Universe, is the Supreme God for most Hindus.

"Oh, yes! A sage, no less!"

"You can't dismiss him just like that!" Balidatta said. "He's widely read. I am sure that while you were busy loafing with your friends, he was deep in study!"

"Well, all his book learning was of no use then, and it's of no use now," Bannu said. "What we want is humaneness, sympathy — or at least a little courtesy! Without these, knowledge is useless. Does memorising facts make one wise? It's the wise men like your Mr Mohapatra who are at the root of all our troubles! In fact, what looks like wisdom to you is only a pose. Mr Mohapatra is what Freud would call a shameless exhibitionist!"

And what Bannu suffers from is an inferiority complex! Balidatta thought. What he forgets, in his depth of learning, is that one has to survive; one must learn how to get on with a variety of people. It's difficult to exist if you are always critical.

So what if Mr Mohapatra was an exhibitionist, a sadist or any other kind of "ist"? Balidatta's concern with him was purely pragmatic!

And now, he was in Mr. Mohapatra's presence.



He'd been standing there for about three minutes already.

Hadn't Mr Mohapatra seen him? He must have!

He waited. Mr. Mohapatra was not his direct superior — but he might become one! Balidatta slipped effortlessly into a posture of docile civility: head lowered, arms crossed behind his back, waist bent slightly — a true descendant of generations of anthropoid ancestors. It had taken great discipline, great sacrifice, to cultivate the ability to slide out of his own person into this other being.

The telephone rang and Mr. Mohapatra picked up the receiver.

"Mohapatra. Yes, Mohapatra speaking ... Yes ... H'm ... Very well." And, replacing the phone: "Idiot!"

Now he turned to Balidatta. "Yes, Balidatta?"

A great wave of joy rose within him, bringing a smile to his face and new life to his limbs. The offering to the god was to be placed on the altar.

"Sir, I've brought these," he said, indicating the pile of correspondence.

"You have brought them? You finished so soon?"

"How could I not finish, sir? It was your work, sir. Urgent!"

"Right, right, Balidatta. Most urgent!"

He took the papers from Balidatta's hand. Once again, he was engrossed in work. Balidatta waited.

At last, he looked up and said: "Very good, Balidatta. You may go. Come over to the house for a few minutes this evening."

And Balidatta imagined, to himself, the words of praise that had not been spoken. This is only the beginning, he thought — the inauguration!

He walked back to the office he shared with the other clerks. The Head Clerk was holding court. A short, heavily built man, whose once strong body had been deformed by age into a series of unsightly bulges. The most prominent part of his face was a huge pair of protruding, snout-like lips, the lower of which was in constant circular motion, fuelled by paan. Large teeth; tufts of thick black hair growing out of fleshy ears. A pair of thick glasses on the nose, but one side of the frame had been replaced by strands of red and yellow office twine.



When the Bara Babu, as he was known, peered at the junior clerks through thick lenses, mouth gaping, ears alert, like a preying predator, there was a furore in their ranks: hands moved faster, papers rustled and busy faces drooped over worktables like faded lotuses.

It was this daunting personality that propped him up in office: the spaces within that skull, it was said, were vacant! But did that matter? His face could look wise when the occasion demanded it; the movements of the head became sagacious. What if he had no personal ability! Wasn't it enough that he could bully, torment and terrorise others to perform?

Four of the clerks sat around him in a ring: Hari Babu, Ram Babu, Krushna Babu and Gopal Babu. The unfortunate Bira Babu was in the dock — the target of this morning's chastisement!

"First, you come late to the office every day!" the Bara Babu roared, cataloguing his crimes by banging a thick index finger on the desk. "You are supposed to come at ten every morning,

right? And you were here at a quarter past ten! Who do you think you are—the Governor?"

Did the Governor really go to work at a quarter past ten? No one knew, but the comparison was enough to bring out the gravity of the offence.

"You think you are the Governor?" the Bara Babu repeated. "But don't forget," holding up his pen, "one stroke of this can cancel you out!"

The four were grave. They would have to look supportive of the Bara Babu's authority—but even a word spoken aloud would bring down Bira Babu's wrath when the Bara Babu wasn't around! So they were scrutinising Bira Babu in studied silence, from head to toe. Later, they could claim muzzled sympathy!

Bira Babu was squirming now.

"Sir, my wife is ill. I have to do the cooking before I come. And the firewood that you get these days, sir—completely damp! You have to blow and blow to get the hearth started! And if I don't cook something, sir, the two kids will be howling all day! I live four miles away, sir—I couldn't get here in time. Only a few minutes late, sir."



"Get away!" the Bara Babu shouted. "I've heard all this before; my hair has turned grey with such talk! As if *we* don't have homes and families! Does the Company pay you to feed your babies? Why don't you resign then? Stay at home and blow your hearth! Cook gruel for your ailing wife! Excuses! You should become a writer! Write novels!"

"I'm not lying, sir. My wife is really ill," Bira Babu said.

"Well, how does the Company care? Are we running a hospital? Or an orphanage?"

Turning to the four: "Now, I ask you! How long can this be tolerated? Late everyday! Why does the Company pay you? Or provide quarters?

"All right, that's number one," he said, continuing the count. "Now tell me, why haven't the ledgers been posted for so many days? I'll teach you a lesson today!"

"Sir, sir," Bira Babu said, "only the returns for the last two days haven't been entered. You told me not to enter them until you had checked them yourself!"

"But did you show up at my house even once?"

The clerks looked at each other. So now they knew! This was the real reason for the Bara Babu's anger! Bira Babu had been lacking in devotion: he should have offered his unpaid services.

What stupidity on his part!

"Sir, my wife is very ill," Bira Babu said, choking back his tears. "I had to go and fetch the doctor in the morning and run down for the medicine in the evening. And the cooking to be done as well, sir. Otherwise, wouldn't I have come, sir? Where else can I go, sir, if not to you? I'll come this evening, sir—I'll fetch the laundry from the washerman. Sir, who else is there to protect us? I'll surely come sir ... it's only that my wife is ill, sir."

"Sir" is a mere form of address, a mark of respect. But in Bira Babu's usage, it humbled the addressor to total insignificance and elevated the addressee to unimagined heights of majesty. This humility, this submission and finally, this invocation of the washerman—there could be no denial! The Bara Babu *had* to change the topic.



"Very well, now go and attend to your work," he said. "See that I don't have to warn you again! The wife is ill! How can you dare to offer such a lame excuse? Aren't you ashamed to hide behind a woman to protect yourself?"

Bira Babu walked back to his desk, chastised.

Balidatta, with perfect timing, chipped in with a joke.

"He's been that way since he was a child, sir," he said loudly. "The schoolmaster would come in search of him, and he would be hiding behind his old mother. 'I've such a terrible tummy ache; please, mother, let me stay home today!' "

Bira Babu walked back to his place as though nothing had happened. And in fact, what *had* happened? This was an everyday affair. He wiped it away with his handkerchief.

The Bara Babu laughed at Balidatta's joke.

And five others in the neighbourhood laughed too, each in his own manner. Balidatta was clucking away in triumph like a hen, just before it lays an egg. He had made the Bara Babu laugh! Krushna Babu produced a protracted, high pitched "Hi, hi, hi, hi!"; Hari Babu's short, staccato "Ha, ha!" was

punctuated with bouts of coughing. Ram Babu had been unable to prolong his merriment; being a feeble man, he had run out of breath and was now trying to launch into a second run, after a rest. Gopal Babu was laughing in every limb: underneath the table, his overhanging belly quivered: "Ho! ho! ho! ho!"

And row upon row of babus in the office took up the chorus. It was a contest of hilarity! They were watching the Bara Babu's face, to make sure that no one stopped laughing before the Bara Babu had done so. Discipline had to be maintained!

Venkat Rao was writing away, handkerchief stuffed in his mouth.

"All right, that's enough," the Bara Babu shouted. "Back to work!"

Silence.

Only the rustling of paper, the scratching of steel nibs on files.

A sheet of paper on Bara Babu's table fluttered away and immediately all five of them stooped to pick it up. It was not easy for Gopal Babu to bend—but he *had* to try! A trouser button gave way under the strain but he didn't give up. Sickly Ram Babu was crawling on his hands and knees, but his weak eyesight hindered him. With an athletic leap Balidatta captured the recalcitrant sheet of paper and returned it to the Bara Babu's table, trapping it beneath a paperweight. The Bara Babu did not even look up from his work.



Later, that afternoon.

Balidatta approached the Bara Babu's desk. Dipping his hand into his trouser pocket, he pulled out a small, paper-wrapped object. Then, bending low, he slowly put out his cupped palm and offered it to the Bara Babu.

It was a single paan, covered with silver foil and fragrant with mysterious essences. From Kusia's famous paan shop.

Balidatta was not an addict himself, but this was his customary offering.

"What's that?" the Bara Babu said. "Oh, the energy pill! Good!"

His jaws were rotating like high-speed mills. "So, what's happening, Balidatta?" he asked benignly.

"Sir, that's just what I have come to ask you," Balidatta replied. "It's all in your hands now, sir; everything depends on your mercy! I entrust my fate to you: do as you will!"

"It hasn't been decided yet," the Bara Babu said gravely.

"But it will be decided soon, won't it, sir?"

"That's true." The Bara Babu turned to his file.

And like a sulking, spoilt child, Balidatta said: "Sir, sir! What's going to happen to me? If you don't tell me I'll go on hunger strike! Won't you tell me, sir?"

The Bara Babu smiled a little. Almost absent-mindedly, as though revealing nothing, he said: "The Sahib has written favourably. But there must be others in the running too, you know."

To mask his jubilation Balidatta rose with a sigh, saying "Sir, you are my only strength. Or else, these people would have stabbed me in the back."

He took leave with folded hands. But he had only walked a few steps when he returned. Bending low, he whispered into the Bara Babu's ear: "Sir, there's something I would like to say to you, but I dare not! I am confused, sir; I don't know what you will think. But if you'll protect me sir, I'll say it."



"What is it?" the Bara Babu asked.

"Sir, have you said something to Venkat Rao lately?"

"About what?"

"No, I mean, did you pull him up? Scold him?"

"Why, what's the matter? Tell me!"

Balidatta fumbled and stuttered, as though the words were choking him, as though he had been deeply wounded by the Bara Babu's insistence. The unpleasant words were refusing to come! Biting his fingers, with head lowered, he paced up and down briefly. The Bara Babu paused in his work, a confused frown on his face, waiting.

"I was very upset, sir. How mischievous some people can be! They'll say things against you for no reason at all! He's been busy talking—not just him, but his wife as well! Says he'll speak to the Sahib when he gets the chance! That he'll expose everything! Now, I ask you, what is there to expose? And if he wants to do something, let him do it! Why talk? What will people think? He says one thing behind your back,

but to your face! He'll bend down and touch your feet, the very embodiment of humility!"

"What! Venkat Rao? What are you saying, Balidatta? Are you sure?"

"Speak softly, sir; he'll make my life miserable if he hears! Such people have to be dealt with differently! I dare not say more now, sir. But I'll come over to your house this evening and tell you everything in detail. Expose you, indeed! Let him try!"

"Oh God!" the Bara Babu exclaimed. "He's a black serpent, a cobra!"

Balidatta left quietly with another namashkar. The Bara Babu never saw him go: he was staring fixedly at the row of desks.

So, that's where the mutiny is brewing!

Venkat Rao was attacking the very source of his livelihood!

Biting his lower lip, he got up with a muffled cry, like that of an animal. He pulled the drawer open and took out a large bunch of keys, extracted a file from one of the steel cupboards and sat down to write, gritting his teeth.

Balidatta went back to his desk, which was next to that of Venkat Rao.



An hour later, when the office was about to be closed, the announcement came. Balidatta had been promoted! Everyone surrounded him and offered their congratulations. A "*has been*" for somebody else meant a *"hasn't"* for others, and a "*might have been*" for each deprived individual. Nevertheless, in this unending battle for survival, this ceaseless attack and counter-attack, it was established practice to offer felicitations, to demand a celebratory paan or dinner. The office peons were asking Balidatta for baksheesh![1]

Venkat Rao walked up to him, smiling, and extended his hand. "My calculations were correct, weren't they?" he said. "Now, you can't blame me."

"Blame you? For what?" Balidatta asked, surprised.

"If my calculations had turned out wrong, wouldn't you have blamed me? Here, have a cigarette! Let's go home!"

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[1] money given to a servant, as a tip, in appreciation of his services or (in this case) in celebration of a happy event.

# Fifteen

It was a new Balidatta who walked out of the office. His feet were so light he was almost flying, tossed about by the currents of air! Was there anything he could not achieve?

He had been promoted!

With one wrench he had ripped away the moorings which had held him down. Now he was away!

Others had been promoted before; others would be promoted again. What was so special? But at this moment, Balidatta was savouring his triumph. Life was good!

His perceptions of success were limited to the office, and their most tangible manifestation was a promotion. Did it mean only a few additional rupees? A financial gain? No! His entire being had undergone promotion. He had become greater than Venkat Rao, than Madhu Babu or Keshab Babu: the events of ordinary life had been transformed into the extraordinary. But this was not the end. He would grow, he would spread. There were no limits.



For as long as he could remember, he had been a loser. His size had encouraged others to tilt their necks downwards when they looked at him, to inflate their chests and to exercise their strength on him. He had suffered everything. He had stayed away from fights and disputes, never said "No!" to anyone, never contradicted an argument. But one thing he had learnt: never to confront anyone in a show of strength. It was far better to retreat, to take cover, than to hold your banner high and take bullets in the chest. Brute strength would not bend people, but praise and soft words would. In school he had been the archetypal "good boy". He had never troubled his teachers; instead, he had assisted authority by secretly reporting misdoings. He had used the same means to gain the favour of his superiors in the office. God had denied him strength — so be it! The timid hare had not done too badly.

His strategy had yielded instant results! Now, on his way home, he felt he had shed his old skin in the office. From this point on, he would be dashing, debonair! He was so unaccustomed to this version of himself that he grew confused.

The shadows were lengthening. He could see his house now. Sarojini must be waiting. He would tell her! His strides grew longer.

A flute warbled in the distance. How peaceful it sounded at the day's end! Then, the stillness of his own home: the tall sajana[1] trees in the yard with their drooping, slender green fruits; the pale yellow flowers of the gourd creeper on the thatch. And coming closer, the lowing of cattle in the shed. His wife lighting the oil lamp at dusk, under the sacred tulsi[2] plant in the courtyard, praying for his long life; the gongs and drums that accompanied the evening chants to the gods.

The flute in the distance . . . wonderful!

But what images were these? Recollections of village life? Mere fantasies! He must have read about them, or perhaps seen them on the screen. But he never visited the cinema. What strange fancies the mind creates! Perhaps they rise out of the yearning of his mechanical existence.



Nonsense.

As he approached his home, Balidatta saw the college student across the road playing the flute at the open window. And, on this side, cheek on hand, sat his wife Sarojini. Rascal! Vagabond! Hooligan! His mind roared out in anger. But what was there to link Sarojini to the flute? Wasn't it he that she waited for, every evening? How lonely she must feel! But his mind refused to listen. The flute-playing student and Sarojini appeared like two sides of the same picture.

Quivering with rage he rattled the door handles, and as the door opened he stormed headlong in. Thoughts of the office and the good news he had brought were forgotten. Sarojini was closing the door gently.

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[1] a kind of tree which produces long, slim fruits (known as "drumsticks"), used as vegetables.

[2] Indian name for the basil plant, which has fragrant leaves and is considered sacred by Hindus.

"Isn't it beautiful?" she said. "How sad it sounds! I've never heard anyone play so well."

"What!" he roared. "You call that playing? What does he think he is doing, the rascal? I'll put a stop to it! These are homes of respectable men, not brothels! I'll show him!"

He advanced towards the front door, small fists clenched in fury. It was not often that his anger found an outlet!

Sarojini's large hand on his shoulder arrested his progress.

"Let me go!" he shouted, trying to shake her off.

Yet another Balidatta — the very embodiment of rage! Perhaps a scene from a drama, witnessed long ago. Life was secretly imitating art!

"Oh ma!" Sarojini said. "What are you *doing*? Where do you want to go?"

"Leave me!" he shouted. "Just see what I do to him!"

She was holding him tightly now. "What's wrong with you? Why are you so upset? How does it matter to us what other people do? You are going to start a fight? Can you do it? Come, lie down on the bed, I'll get you a glass of water."



What was that she said? Can you do it? How absolutely right! The words were like hammer blows. His temper cooled instantly. Yes indeed! Those massive arms, that bear-like chest! Better not tangle with the ruffian.

He was sweating. Unbuttoning his coat, he said elegantly, in a manner befitting his new status, "Excuse me, Sarojini, my nerves are jumping! There must be something wrong with me. So much work in the office! I'm dead tired! And here I was, hoping to relax at home, when this fellow starts trumpeting! If you could really play, it would be another matter, sonny! We would love to listen! But this howling! It's like the screeching of vultures! Idiot!"

"Well, forget about him," Sarojini said. "Why spoil your peace of mind?"

"Just you wait! I'll send word to his uncle, Nirod Babu. We'll see how he plays that flute next time."

"As if Nirod Babu will listen to you!" she said.

"Not to me perhaps — but he'll surely listen to you," Balidatta said. "I'll say that he's pestering *you* with his flute playing."

"Do as you please," she said, exasperated. "Now come and have some food."

As he sat down to eat he said, "It's difficult to keep your balance under all this pressure."

And warming up, he continued, "Do you know, Saroj, all working people have the same problem. In the office, everything is bottled up inside; it's only at home that you can let yourself go. That's why there are frequent quarrels. Well, it's part of our working lives. It ruins your nature."

Sarojini was looking down sullenly. She couldn't let the storm blow away so easily.

Balidatta kept talking as he ate. His plate was almost three-quarters empty. With his hunger sated, peace returned. Then he suddenly remembered: he had forgotten something of the greatest importance. He was amused. A thin sliver of laughter gushed forth like steam escaping. "Saroj, have you heard? The announcement was made today. Only one person in the entire office has been promoted. Me!"

"Really!" she cried. "And you haven't told me yet? Nice person you are!"



The storm clouds on her face were blown away in an instant. The magic mantra[1] had dispelled all resentment. The two hearts sang to the same rhythm. Two lovebirds on a branch. She was somewhat bigger than he was, but no matter! He would gather wisps of straw; they would build the nest together. Then the eggs. Then the new home: he, she and the chicks.

Oh, the joy of promotion!

She folded a paan for him and tucked it lovingly between his lips. He didn't swallow it, but held out the tip, bringing his face close to hers. Laughing, she snipped off the tip with her teeth.

"What next?" she asked, with a twinkle.

He thought she was asking about the significance of the promotion.

"What next?" he replied gravely. "Perhaps we can have two square meals now, because my pay has increased from seventy

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[1] a particular combination of words which when recited are supposed to have a powerful magical effect, energising and empowering the person who chants them.

five to a hundred and fifty. I am entitled to an office peon, starting tomorrow. We'll have to shift, no doubt: we can't manage with 'Type C' accommodation any more. But apart from all that, what this promotion means is that Balidatta has reached adulthood. We are no longer clerks, you understand — we are *officers*, no matter of what grade. Officers! If luck holds, we can become Mohapatra, we can become the Sahib! All we need is a few years of hard work and a bit of tact! Now how do I explain "tact" to you? There is neither an Oriya equivalent nor do we Oriyas know what tact is. Tact is the ability to charm others, to read their minds, to get them to do what *you* want — by strategy, by strength or by skill! To know the appropriate words for each occasion, to be able to produce cream out of water! To be able to skin a man alive so smoothly that he doesn't even blink! This is what we call ability — *tact*! You see how quickly I got promoted! The Rajputs[1] knew what tact was, so they were able to rule even in Mughal times.[2] This is what history tells you. Now, just look at the others . . ."

Charmed by his own eloquence he rattled on, getting more and more intoxicated by the minute. Sarojini listened quietly. Whether he talked sense or nonsense, a new persona was revealed through his words. His eyes held hers in a spell.



"None of you had faith in me, did you?" he said. "Now you can see for yourself. This is nothing; it's only the beginning. There is more to come! But do you know what our handicap is? We get no support at all from our wives! I grant you, you women are experts in the kitchen; but even a hired five-rupee cook could give you food! No, don't be upset! But I ask you, what help are you in my job?

"Our scriptures say the wife is the sahadharmini[3] — the partner in dharma. Now, what is dharma[4]? One's profession! But

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[1] a tribe living in Rajasthan, a state in the north western part of India, known for their valour in battle.

[2] almost the whole of India, including Orissa, was ruled for nearly 300 years, from the 16th century onwards, by Mughal kings, whose ancestors came from Central Asia.

[3] Sanskrit word meaning "partner in religion". Synonym for "wife", who is supposed to partner her husband in performing religious rituals.

[4] a Sanskrit word with many meanings, including " religion", " the duty that one is born to perform", etc.

your dharma and mine never seem to meet! Just look at all the other Company wives: how smart they are! They know exactly what to say in the club: the right word can mean instant promotion for the husband! Some can dance, some can sing, some can play—and all know how to talk! Once they've got what they want—bye! bye! Who gets to know? Or what does one lose? The husband gets four promotions in one year! How some people have risen—those who were spinning thread are now company executives! But we've got stones hanging round our necks—mere stones!"

He was being enlarged at her cost—glorifying his own exploits and reducing her to stone! Sarojini was silent. But after a minute, she said: "Others have done these things, you say? Well, maybe. But if the wives are to serve the Company as well as the husbands, who'll look after the home? And why would one need a home anyway? But then, we are not all alike, are we? We are not all good at all things. I am as I am, so why blame me if I can't do certain things?"

"Oh, you don't understand!" he said. "Who's blaming you? But how do you know you can't do it? Have you tried? I say you can do anything if you put your mind to it!"



"I don't need anything. I have nothing to work for."

"Why don't you just give it a try?" he said. "For a start, try teaching yourself English. Anyway, make some paan for me, will you? I'll go for a walk!"

She handed him the paan and he walked out of the house.

## Sixteen

Balidatta walked through the darkness, lost in thought.

He seemed to be advancing through a tunnel of light. The darkness on either side was frightening. Ahead, bright lights beckoned, but the road seemed interminable. He would have to keep going.

The future unfolded before him, layer by layer. Whom would he resemble? Mohapatra? Mishra? Singh? Johnson? They were so many — and yet so few!

Even a block of stone turns into a god when it is bowed to regularly. Why then should a man not change when he is saluted everyday? Authority resides in his face; his voice turns gruff; his very gait seems to say: "Beware! I have power!" People catch the scent of power in the wind and step aside; they stand by the roadside and talk in hushed whispers. The rules which govern ordinary mortals no longer apply.

And now he would become one of them!

Now he could climb safely to the topmost branch and mock those who passed below. His entire existence as a clerk lay spread out before him. How hateful it was! He would have no sympathy for his own kind. He would make them dance to his tune; he knew every trick in their book! But he would never again be one of them. The past lay in tatters.

He would be an incarnation of strength — though not perhaps in body; an embodiment of efficiency, a paragon of tact.

A superman: unrelenting, unwavering.

People would imitate him, bow, await his pleasure. Stand outside his door, hoping to catch his eye. He would give them no more than a minute each, looking pointedly at his watch and asking: "Anything more to say?"

It was intoxicating! But his would be a lonely existence.

Suddenly he craved a smoke. Stopping in front of a paan shop, he asked for a Capstan cigarette. The shopkeeper was busy preparing paan for a group of customers; at the same time, he was engaged in a heated discussion of the football matches currently being played. A new star had appeared on the football horizon: one Farid Miyan. His prospects and talents were being analysed in minute detail. Business was forgotten for the moment.

Balidatta had to repeat his order four times before the paanwala responded, without a glance: "Yes, coming up!" He turned to his other customers: "Babu, what was it you ordered? Paan with tobacco? Or plain?"

Back to Farid Miyan.

"Aren't you going to give me a cigarette?" Balidatta asked at length, irritated.

The paanwala[1] looked up apologetically. The babu had been kept waiting! He took a cigarette out of the packet and extended it to Balidatta.

"Don't you agree, babu, that Farid Miyan is even better than his uncle Samad Miyan had been?" he asked sociably.

"I don't know," Balidatta said. "I don't go to football matches."

"Oh!" the paanwala said. Obviously someone inferior. He returned to his other customers.

"Give me a light," Balidatta said.

"Use that!" the paanwala replied, pointing to a coiled rope, made of coconut fibre, which hung from a pole. The tip was kept smouldering at all times.

"Don't you have matches?" Balidatta asked.

"Lots!" the paanwala said carelessly. "Do you want to buy a box? Here!"

"No, no need," Balidatta replied. The cigarette had already cost him most of his self-respect. There was no point in trying to salvage the remainder; he would use the rope.



The glowing tip was a little too high and he had to reach up on his toes. The wind made the rope swing and Balidatta, cigarette between his lips, weaved back and forth, dancing to the same rhythm. He felt sure people were staring.

He walked on, snubbed. He wasn't appreciated—neither by his wife nor by the general public. The bride is considered snot-nosed in her own village! Never mind! He would smash his own way like a steamroller. They would come flocking, fawning. And then!

When someone becomes aware of his own strength, he wants to try it out, to test its limits. The trial is performed on someone helpless, incapable of resistance. The child cuts its teeth on a soft pencil; the young bull looks for a tender sapling to gore. A fascist state invades a defenceless neighbour.

This intoxication was now drawing him to Bannu's home, for Bannu had lost the race to him. He would find true expression in Bannu's company.

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[1] a seller of paan. (The suffix "wala" means "one who sells".)

He was going to enlighten Bannu. "Bannu!" he would say, "How long can you continue like this? Give up your quarrelsome ways. Be soft! You have brains, you have talent. Use them!"

Then, because Bannu was fond of books, he would use books to invade his mind. "Bannu, read the books that really matter," he would tell him. "Read Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* and Baron Okimura's *Success*. Now, here is the essence of their wisdom. First, every human being wants to preserve his own ego, and so clings to his own opinion. If you argue and contradict, you offend his ego and make him cling all the more to his opinion. So what should you do? Say 'Yes' to him at the very beginning. 'Sir', you should say, 'What you say is absolutely correct. Who could be more right? But, Sir, perhaps it could be done this way too? As *you* wish, Sir.'

"Briefly, then, Bannu, you have to keep repeating: '*You* ... *you* are doing this ... These are *your* thoughts.' Never *I*! There is no room for *I* in this relationship. Then, gradually, the *You* and the *I* will merge; the *You* will do what the *I* wants. The *You* will argue with himself and say: 'This is the truth! Why did I ever hold a contrary opinion?' And that is when you must pin the blame on your enemy. 'Sir,' you must say, "you were ill advised!' And then, the poor simpleton *You* will hold your enemy responsible for his own miscalculations. Two aims will be served: first, your thinking will prevail and second, your enemy will be eliminated! What do you say, Bannu? Isn't this a wonderful science? All successful men have used this strategy; can you do less?"



He would be generous with his sympathy, for had he not been promoted? The vessel of his being was full to overflowing.

## Seventeen

Bannu's home.

Familiar sights, familiar smells, reviving old memories. The jasmine bushes near the open door, the

shaft of light invading the darkness outside the little room; the large mansion across the road, the cars, the crowds of people . . .

As he pushed the wicket gate open and entered the little garden, Bannu's pet mongrel bitch emerged and barked a challenge. Strange! She usually allowed him to pass with a wag of her tail. Had his scent changed?

He picked up a stone to defend himself and the bitch emitted a loud, high-pitched howl of defiance. In dog language, this was an appeal for aid. She was the resident belle of the canine world, with a large circle of admirers. They responded immediately to her cry of distress. In a moment, he found himself surrounded.

Outrage turned into terror. What an awful situation! They were preparing to charge: some were pawing the road, others were lifting hind legs to vent their urine and their anger. Low rumbling growls, in different tones and accents, issued from their throats. The black bitch danced back and forth from her post near the jasmine bushes, inciting her knights to give battle.

"Bannu!" a single, despairing cry went up.

"Balidatta, it's you!" Bannu said, responding. "Oh, come in, come inside. She won't bite. Here, Tommy, Tommy!"



Tommy, the bitch,[1] humiliated, withdrew with a last muffled woof. Her champions retreated. Balidatta was liberated, but delivered into Bannu's hands—helpless and shivering.

He was dragged inside by the sleeve. "Shontu da, Nanda, Ananta, Ashok—look who's here! Balidatta!" Bannu announced, and pushed him into an easy chair. "Here, drink this tea and relax. You're trembling!"

"Namashkar," Balidatta greeted the others.

"Namashkar, namashkar," Shontu da replied. "How are you, Balidatta? What's the matter? Why do you look so pale?"

"He's just been promoted!" Nanda said. They laughed.

"What strange logic!" Ananta said. "Why should promotion turn him pale?"

"Because dogs will bark at you if you are promoted!" Nanda replied.

They roared with laughter. Balidatta was obliged to join in.

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[1] note the irony in the name. Probably the most common name given to pet cats and dogs in India. Gender does not seem to matter.

Nanda stood up and said "After three promotions, I've become wise, Balidatta Babu. Dogs will pursue you. They're after me too. That's why I've decided to quit. I'm off, Bannu."

"So soon?" Bannu said.

"Well, one has to go *someday*, stupid! So why not leave when you're still in control?" Nanda walked towards the door.

"Where are you going so early, Nanda Babu?" Balidatta asked.

"I too am trying for a promotion, Balidatta Babu," Nanda replied. "So I must call on the boss every evening. Or else, what will he think?"

"That's true, that's true," Balidatta said, nodding sagely.

"Stay!" Bannu said. Shontu da seemed to be meditating; Ananta and Ashok were busy reading the newspaper.

"I knew you would say that," Nanda said to Bannu. "You don't understand these things. But Balidatta Babu understands! You simpleton, one *has* to make these evening calls. One gains nothing by sitting at home every evening, like you!"

"He's right, Bannu. Let him go!" Balidatta said. "But Nanda Babu, which position are you being promoted to?"



"Should I tell you?" Nanda said. "Does anyone announce his promotion in advance? You know what they say: the wise do not talk, lest their enemies should hear! Isn't that right, Balidatta Babu? Do you ever talk? Now listen everybody, I've told you I'm going to be promoted: that's certain. You'll come to know about it soon. But should I also tell you *where*? What do you say, Bannu?"

"Yes, tell us," Bannu said.

"Tell us, Nanda Babu" Balidatta insisted.

"No, don't" Ananta said.

"He's mad!" Shontu da said. "What can *he* tell us?

Nanda sat down again. "Very well, let me tell you before I go. Because Ananta is asking me not to. Listen Balidatta Babu, I'll tell you which promotion I'm trying for, because you and I are not going to compete there. Shontu da is already there, ahead of us: he's the Mother's favourite son! Ananta and I are neck-to-neck but he's sure to overtake me. Now listen!"

Smiling ecstatically, he chanted a composition by Bhima Bhoi, the mystic poet:

*No one knows his dwelling,*
*The void is his home.*
*There is neither winter nor summer,*
*Sunrise nor sunset.*
*Neither form nor colour has he.*
*But oh! that seductive gait*
*That drives the wise insane!*
*Hold fast to that single foot,*
*For its twin, no man may find.*
*Says the orphan Bhima:*[1]
*Lord, grant me that unseen, untasted taste!*

"Now you know, Balidatta Babu, where my promotion will take me," he said. "I'm trying, but it's difficult. It's impossible!" Once again, he sang:

*Intertwined feet which I seek in vain!*
*Oh, when will my sorrow end?*

Still singing, he walked away, calling out to them: "Brothers, I warn you: if you have claims to make on Nanda, now is the time! Let no man keep me in his debt! Namashkar, namashkar to all!"



Bannu said sadly: "Perhaps he'll go straight to the monastery by the cremation ground[2]."

"It's all Govinda's[3] will!" Shontu da said with a sigh.

Balidatta stared in amazement. What was this scene that he had witnessed? Theatre? Do responsible, grown men behave like this? Then he recalled: the Nanda he had just seen was very different from the Nanda he had known. The Nanda of old had been smart, fashionable. A lover of all things beautiful. But he had not been content to worship Beauty from afar: he insisted on tasting the fruits offered on the altar! He had been "adopted

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[1] This stanza (as explained in the text) is from a poem by Bhima Bhoi, an Oriya poet of the seventeenth century, celebrated for his metaphysical and intensely spiritual poetry. One of the conventions of medieval Indian poetry is that the poet names himself in the last verse of each poem, usually choosing an epithet such as "orphan" to express humility.

[2] a place (usually on the bank of a river) where Hindus burn (cremate) their dead.

[3] another name for Vishnu, one of the trinity of Hindu gods.

brother" to many, private tutor to many more; he had acted as escort, counsellor, guide. The adoration of Beauty had drawn him to temple congregations, made him kneel in churches, taken him to the back-lanes behind mosques; made him learn languages and hire rooms in cheap hotels. Many were the beatings he had received, many the embroidered handkerchiefs he had been presented. His sagas of conquest were unending.

How different he was now! Unshaven, with vermilion and ashes[1] smeared across his forehead, his eyes red with passion or with tears. A fanatic for religion.

He had been a man of the world. Educated, highly placed, quick to grab an opportunity, an atheist.

It was difficult to imagine Nanda turning ascetic. Life seemed to have no value for him now. No more cares for the daily bread!

"What are you thinking about, Balidatta?" Bannu asked. "Here, have a biri."

"Nothing," Balidatta replied.

"Liar! Don't think so much, or you'll find yourself following Nanda," Bannu said.

"There's no danger of that!" Shontu da said.



And now Ananta said: "Bannu, we've been solving riddles together for quite some time now. Won't you introduce us at least?"

"Oh, I forgot!" Bannu said. "Here we are, in Act Seven of the *Ramayana*[2] and I haven't even introduced the cast! Well, this is Sri Balidatta Das, eminent company executive. Promoted only this day!

"And the gentleman here is Sri Ananta Kulkarni Chowpattanayak, renowned poet, celebrated politician, well-known director of films in Bombay as well as film-critic. He is also — wait, don't interrupt — a landlord and Barrister-at-Law, Lincoln's Inn."

What! Balidatta's mouth opened in surprise.

"And the other gentleman is Sri Ashok Mehta, M.Com. His family has lived in Orissa for seventeen generations, and

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[1] a Hindu who has become a "sanyasi" (i.e., given up the material world for a spiritual life) covers his forehead with ashes from the sacrificial fire and vermilion powder offered to God.

[2] the famous epic poem which is one of the holy books of the Hindus.

his grandfather is the celebrated poet, Madhav Mehta. He is a well-known journalist himself, editor of a monthly journal, besides being Managing Director of Mehta and Sons, leading contractors."

"Oh!" Balidatta exclaimed.

"And this," Ananta said, "is Sri Banabehari Patnaiak, M.R.C.V.S, Legion of Honour, member of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. He is assistant to the celebrated detective, Sexton Blake!"

Guffaws of laughter! So, had they been pulling his leg? Was it all a joke?

Who *were* these people? Creatures of the night? Where had he seen them before? This man, who was introduced to him as Ananta Chowpattanayak—hadn't he seen someone like him, somewhere, addressing a large crowd? The same features—the same gaunt face, square jaws, keen eyes. There had been garlands round his neck and promises of a golden tomorrow on his lips. The applause had been deafening. The same person? The man who had inflamed thousands, made them laugh, made them cry?



And then, one day, he had come across a photograph in a newspaper. The same face: the dagger-sharp features, bottomless eyes! But he looked emaciated. The report in the paper referred to a revolt that he had led in some inaccessible part of the country. A torch had been lit; the chains of bondage had been about to snap. Then, something went wrong. He was captured. Chained hand and foot, lashed with whips. Bamboo stakes had been thrust up his anus, the fumes of red-hot chillies forced into his nostrils. The whole country had shivered in hatred and anger. Even Balidatta, wrapped up in his petty concerns, had clenched his little fists and waved them at the unseen enemy.

Was it this man? Surely, that person had not been a director of films!

And this other person, this Ashok Mehta: hadn't Balidatta seen him often on the roads, riding his bicycle in company with writers and critics? On platforms, addressing crowds? Strewing petals of wisdom. But that person had not been a contractor!

Introductions . . . identities.

What does the bird on the wing have in common with the inert lump of feathers on the branch?

What identity does the live person share with the lump of clammy clay?

Whose identity? What identity?

Outside, the darkness of the night; inside his head, the echoes of Nanda's last song. They sat in silence, each one of them. This insane house of Bannu's gave rise to strange echoes.

Balidatta felt as though he was in the presence of death. He shivered, restless to get out.

Then Shontu da spoke, more to himself than to them. His voice resounded as though it came from the inner dome of some temple.

"Well, you've been introduced now. Does it make any sense? One is a barrister-at-law, another a contractor, and the third is from the Federal Bureau of Investigation! And who am I? A Tibetan lama! Who is who?

"One can only hope to be introduced to oneself—though that's something the rishis have been attempting for ages.



"What *is* one's introduction anyway? What people call us, what they identify us with—it's only a label! You can change the label, but not the thing. The label cannot describe the object, can it? And yet, we are all busy trying to collect labels. That's the trouble!"

Balidatta's head reeled. The clock struck ten. Ten p.m.! He had promised to call on the Bara Babu that night!

Another day wasted!

He walked out, past the bend in the road. Ahead lay the wide, open street. Tall buildings, shops, houses. Cars, people. Bright lights. He stood at the crossroads. The echoes seemed to pursue him. With an effort, he wrenched the cobwebs away.

"Idiots!" he said striding briskly, mimicking Mr Mohapatra's voice. "Lunatics!"

## Eighteen

Sarojini closed the door. And instantly, a door seemed to shut somewhere between her inner, private self and the other self that inhabited the outer world of sensation and perception. Now the inner self was alone, unguarded; it could unmask itself, step out of disguise and play with itself! Strange what her mind could do! The tendencies arising in the inner self were mirrored in the simplest of actions in the outer world—the closing of a door, the stubbing of a toe against a door frame, the act of watching a stick of firewood slowly turn to ashes.

She was alone in the house. The door was shut.

Unthinking, she went about her daily chores—sweeping, lighting the lamps, putting things in order, blowing the hearth into bright flame as she cooked the evening meal. The pot of rice was bubbling. It was dark outside.



It was Balidatta who had stumbled and stubbed his toe and cried out in pain. This simple act had triggered the feelings lurking in the darkness of her mind. The unquiet longings of the woman, which his actions, the trappings of his office and the glory of his promotion had not been able to quench.

Her eyes, watering from the smoke, now filled with hot tears. Her life seemed to be turning to ashes.

When she felt like crying the conscious mind intervened. Memories returned, one by one. Her grandfather had died. Her grandmother was no more—how loving she had been! Her mother's sister's husband had bounced her up and down on his pot belly! Where was he? Death—and then separation! Then, back to one's losses and injuries. Self pity and self consolation.

You could not escape the salt of your tears.

How full of love her father's home had been! And here, in this alien place, there was no joy—life was machine-like. Where were all her friends? What a life! Gradually, the tears ceased; her mind grew still. Then, something revived within

her, tensely coiled and reared its head; she grew restless, tingling with feelings she could barely understand.

The rice was boiling furiously. Countless bubbles rose to the surface, burst and disappeared. Others followed immediately — there were no gaps, no empty spaces. Endless bubbles. Always full. From one fullness to another. You could watch those dancing bubbles everyday and yet find something new.

She sat there, watching the pot of rice. A commonplace scene: a housewife by the hearth, cooking.

Nine o'clock.

He would return soon. He had just been promoted: his stride would be different, longer. They would be moving shortly to a larger house. Then, there would be wealth. She liked the idea of being rich! How did it feel? What would life be like?

Her parents had once negotiated a match for her in a neighbouring village. The matchmaker had reported great riches: they owned many houses, had silos[1] full of grain, innumerable servants. The horoscopes hadn't matched and the dreams of affluence had faded. Since then, she had become skilled in reading signs of wealth — expensive clothes, bodies laden with gold, from head to foot. But no! The wealthy did not always display their wealth — they didn't need to. It was not enough to own houses, lands, carriages: one had to have the effortless authority that wealth could bring. It wasn't enough to possess; you needed people to talk about your possessions. Those who *have* need those who *don't*. But for those who have nothing, those who have would have nothing!



One hundred and fifty rupees a month. It wasn't so much, but it would grow. Her husband's ambitions and endeavour were not in proportion to his size! She would become rich — but could wealth give her everything? Could it bring happiness? Well, maybe not; but with its help, she could at least *fake* happiness!

Perhaps happiness would come after all. Her husband often told her: "I wish you were educated; I wish you could step outside these doors! Then, we could mix socially with the big people. How quickly our luck would change!"

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[1] a very large, covered container in which grain is stored; often, it is a store room.

What did she want? There were longings that could not be expressed, could not be revealed even to her own conscious self. They remained mere shadows of the mind, silent dreams, whose outlines could not be captured. But the inner being yearned to bask in the warmth of those inchoate desires.

Was somebody calling?

"Is anybody in?"

Startled out of her thoughts, a still agitated Sarojini opened the front door and peeped out.

"Who is it?"

It was dark outside and all she could see was the glowing cigarette end. "It's me, Mohapatra."

She took a couple of steps backward and banged the two halves of the door shut.

"Oh, my foot!" she heard him cry. "Please listen!"

Oh God! He must have put his foot inside the open door by mistake! Now he was bending over, holding his foot by the ankle. Two or three "Ohhs!"

Like a four-footed beast! With an injured foot. What was she to do? Who was there to help?



She could neither stay nor go. She was shivering. Her heart fluttered. Biting her lip, breathless, she stood there and watched him holding his foot.

Mr. Mohapatra injured!

He looked up. "Is Balidatta Babu at home?"

"No."

"Oh—then . . ."

How those eyes glowed! The voice sounded hollow. Perhaps the injury was serious. Mr Mohapatra was standing up now. One step . . ., two steps, into the outer room. Sarojini was still looking at the foot.

"Please don't think about it! It was entirely my fault. Balidatta Babu isn't at home, then? What a pity! If he had been home, I would have asked him for a cup of tea. He's been promoted today, hasn't he? I am sure he would have offered me a cup! Now he's a brother officer!"

It was very dark. Inside the house, the light was dim. His voice carried the suggestion of a laugh.

She stood there quietly. When tea was mentioned she remembered the teacups in the little alcove. In the same room.

Should she refuse the hint? What would Balidatta say?

"He had to ask, and still you refused? You couldn't do this little thing? Shame on you!"

The alcove was close to where he was standing. She stretched out her hand.

Mr. Mohapatra gazed, fascinated, at the warm flesh. The soft tinkle of the teacups caused a stir in his blood. Sarojini's hand shook; the cups and saucers scattered, would have fallen to the ground, but for the intervention of another hand. Was there a pressure on her arm? Confusion. She was trembling all over like a leaf. The earth rocked. Someone was supporting her. Her eyes closed. When she opened them again she was perspiring. Shivering. Somebody was saying: "Steady, steady. Or you will stumble again. Fall again." Nothing dropped, nothing broken. She picked up the cups and the teapot and, stooping slightly, rushed back straight into the kitchen without a look, a storm raging inside her head.



Straight to the kitchen hearth. That was her refuge, her fortress.

The flames were leaping up.

While she was still trying to recover she heard Mr Mohapatra's amused voice, faintly sarcastic, from the outer room.

"We were lucky! Or else Mr. Das's favourite tea cups would have been smashed—hi, hi! These china cups, once they fall, they are finished! You can't join the bits again—hi, hi, hi!"

Utter silence. Ages passed. Then again, from the outer room: "Oh, Balidatta Babu? Where had you gone? I've been waiting for you!"

"Sir, namashkar! Namashkar, sir! When did you come, sir? Sir, paan?

"Don't worry about me; my tea is on the way. I've had a royal welcome! After all, you've been promoted ..."

"Sir, it's all your kindness; who else is there to help?"

"Certainly, certainly. I said to the Sahib: 'The promotion should go to Balidatta; no one else is suitable.' Anyway, we'll talk about that later; first, you should go in."

"Sir, I heard Madam was suffering from toothache ..."

"Toothache? I don't know!"

"Yes, sir, she's been having trouble with one of her teeth. Your orderly told me. I've informed the doctor."

"Oh, then she must have gone to the dispensary. She has pyorrhoea,[1] you know; she gets these pains now and then. I'm happy to see you taking such an interest. But, Balidatta Babu, you seem to be returning home very late. Your wife is all alone. I suggest you keep a small servant boy. However, please go in now; you're awaited!"

Drunk with success, Balidatta strutted into the inner verandah, smiling blissfully. Sarojini had been listening; she too was bathed in smiles—the very picture of marital devotion. Hurriedly she unlaced his shoes, helped him take his coat off, and whispered: "Oh dear, what confusion! You were away, and I heard somebody call and opened the door. And there was this man. I nearly died! He said he was Mr. Mohapatra and asked if you were in. I told him you weren't and he said he would wait. Then he asked for some tea! I thought: how can I refuse? He's *asking* for tea! I made some, but there was no one to take it to him. I thought I would go up to the door and put the cup down on the floor. Whatever would he think!"



"Why, couldn't you have gone in and put the cup on the table? Would that be a sin? Just like you! Do you know how important he is? I owe him my promotion! And he *asked* for tea! Oh, he's so simple, so open! Really, he's so kind, so kind! But are you going to offer him just tea? Why don't you make some halva[2]?"

"You seem to be happily engaged, Balidatta Babu," Mr. Mohapatra called out from the outer room. "How stupid of me! I've mistimed my visit. Anyway, please don't mind me. I'm off!"

"Sir, sir, please give me just one more minute," he entreated.

"Oh, all right, all right! I'm not going."

A little later, Sarojini stood concealed behind the door, holding the tea and the halva. Only a part of her body was visible.

The offering on the altar.

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[1] infection of the gums which causes bleeding.

[2] a rich Indian pudding made from semolina (cream of wheat).

Balidatta carried the utensils to the table.

"What's this? "Mr. Mohapatra cried out. "Black magic! No dinner for me tonight!"

And then: "This is delicious! Balidatta Babu, your wife is truly a gem!"

There was a subdued release of laughter from the concealment of the door.

"I feel jealous!"

## Nineteen

"Quite a flutter in your house last night!"

Ram Babu's wife had taken up position across the fence, early next morning.

"Eh?"

"Quite a flapping in your house last night."



"What?"

"Don't try to hide things from me! You are an important person now; you have important visitors. Why should you care about your poor neighbours, sister? Well, these eyes have seen much; they are going to see much more. May the gods bring you fulfillment! Be happy! But what's this you're doing? Why are you plucking the unripe papayas? They'll ripen if you leave them on the tree."

"Well, you can have a couple. Cook them for dinner."

"I don't want them. But don't pluck them. They'll ripen."

"What use will they be? We're leaving this house."

"Ah, so that's why! Now I know! The lime tree was loaded with blossoms; now it's bare. Did you pluck them as well? Somebody else could have eaten them, if not you. There would have been at least a cartload. How expensive they are now! Let the papayas be!"

"Is it too much for you to bear?" Sarojini said.

"Of course not!"

"Then why don't you go home?"

"I *am* at home, am I not? Well, I'll have to shut my eyes to many things, so why should I bother? Very well, I'm going. But it's not good to uproot a tree you planted yourself."

She left.

And Sarojini began, in fact, to pull out the trees by their roots.

She was not going to leave any trace of her occupation behind when she moved out. Not even a straw.

But human beings leave a great deal of themselves behind, no matter how unwillingly. This was what Sarojini and Balidatta realised, when they had finished tying up their belongings and the bullock cart came around to collect them.

They would have to leave the town, not just the house. Company orders. Balidatta had been promoted and it was felt he could be given weightier responsibilities. So he was being transferred out, to a distant place. He was overjoyed: his salary had been raised and he would have new power to exercise. The future was full of promise. He was impatient to go: the arrangements had all been made. Now, as he loaded his belongings onto the cart, he shouted: "Come on! Let's go!" But at the moment of departure, some unconscious human weakness held him back. One is always compelled to look back, no matter how strong the inclination may be to walk ahead; for what remains behind, invariably, is a part of oneself which cannot be carried away.



Each morning he had awakened to the same scene; the feelings of home had been tied to these surroundings. The only sky he had known was the little patch seen from this home; against this background had been performed the various acts of his body and mind; this was where he had brushed his teeth, bathed, morning after morning. The house had moulded itself into a protective covering for his being, responsive to his every need. Now he would have to give it up.

Many lands, many homes. Wherever the Company chose to send him. Where is home anyway? Your father is cremated on the banks of the Ganga and your mother's ashes are scattered in the Godavari. Your nuptials are performed in a rented

house somewhere in the Vindhyas[1] and your funeral on some unknown seashore. Man is a bird on the wing, but the orders to fly are issued by the Company. The bird flies on; the nest remains. What's wrong with that?

Tugging sharply at the spider's webs which were clinging to him, holding him back, Balidatta shouted: "It's getting late! Let's go!"

Sarojini was prostrating herself on the ground, bowing to some unknown deity, taking leave. She was dressed for the journey: coloured sari, fresh vermilion sparkling in the parting of her hair, her feet dyed red with auspicious alta.[2]

The sight of his wife filled Balidatta with tenderness. "Come, come!" he said, turning for a last look at his home. Had something been left behind? Not a thing! Waste paper, old rags, discarded shoes, old brooms — everything had been tied up and loaded onto the cart. Where the garden had been now lay heaps of dead twigs. The sweepings from the house were piled against the front door.

The old sweeper woman, who had entered through the backdoor, was waiting; perhaps there was something for her. Some termite-eaten planks of pine wood from old packing cases, a metal cooking-pot with its rim bashed in, a few pieces of bamboo. Sarojini pointed at them magnanimously and said: "Take them. There may be some firewood in the yard."



She turned and walked towards the front door. The neighbours had gathered to bid her farewell. "I am going, sister." "Are you going, then?" "Don't call me names when I'm gone!" "Do write, eh?" "Namashkar, namashkar, namashkar."

Suddenly, the ties seemed very real, very tangible. "Will we ever meet again?" she thought.

The accumulated memories of five years. Familiar scenes, which would be forgotten like a novel that had been read and thrown away. The characters of the novel would vanish from memory, the events would be wiped away. The shared

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[1] the range of high hills which separates the plains of northern India from the Deccan plateau, in the south.

[2] a red dye used by women and young girls, specially in Bengal and Orissa, to colour their toes and the sides of their feet. It is supposed to bring good luck.

laughter, the quarrels, the secret scandals, the ugliness, the lingering affection. Once, these experiences had been as familiar as the old clothes stored in her cupboard. Bits and pieces of her household. All would be forgotten. Ten years from now, they would stare at each other, total strangers, after a chance encounter.

"We are going, friends! Namashkar!"

The bullock cart creaked into lurching motion.

Sarojini sat facing the rear. There was the college student, staring with blank eyes. She looked him straight in the face and smiled, from a distance; but the face still looked blank, uncomprehending.

As though he was staring at a kite, flying high up in the sky.

Kites were soaring, diving, intertwining. Fluttering apart with their severed strings trailing.

"We shall never meet again" she thought.

He stood transfixed, staring like an imbecile. The cart rolled on. His face grew smaller and smaller, fainter, feebler. How helpless he looked! He had lost all motion, all language.

The cart went round a bend in the road.



"There, that's Mr. Mohapatra's house," Balidatta pointed out.

She twisted her head around to look. She could see no one; nevertheless, she pulled the end of her sari over her head, partly veiling her face.[1] She could feel her cheeks glowing.

Another kite had been lost here, its string cut. Nothing remained but the deep sighs.

"And that's our office," Balidatta said." Do you know where I sat? There, behind that black screen."

Pigeons in their cages. Strutting around, fluttering their wings.

"And do you know where I'll sit now, if I ever come back? There, in that room, on the other side. Mark it well!'

Sarojini listened but heard nothing. She was looking out of the corners of her eyes. The Company offices stretched on unendingly. The pigeons were cooing boastfully. The cart wheels

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[1] most traditional Indian women practised "purdah" (i.e., they would not expose their faces to men who were strangers). The end of the sari was used to veil the face.

creaked in protest, complaining, accusing. Unwilling. But she would not stop; she would go on. How far, she did not know.

## Twenty

A new setting.
Sunrise.

The train hissed to a stop. There was a tall, elderly man waiting on the platform, near the exit, wrapping a turban round his balding head. Nervously, he bowed and said: "My respects to you, Ma. Respects, huzoor.[1] I am huzoor's chaprasi.[2] I have a cart waiting."

Balidatta stretched his limbs and looked at him sternly. Sarojini smiled.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Nita," he replied, bowing again, with his hands folded.

He was dressed in livery: white cotton trousers and long coat, reaching below the knees, both crumpled and dirty. Draped across his shoulder and chest was a broad green sash, on which was mounted a brass shield, bearing the Company's emblem and name.



He looked alternately at the faces of Balidatta and Sarojini and said, in a mournful voice: "I have no father and no mother. You are my mother and father. I survive on your kindness."

Sarojini laughed. This was the first time someone had surrendered to her so completely. Her face glowed with pride; her mind was flooded with tenderness. She looked at the man in front of her: gaunt face; rheumy eyes; thick, dark lips; grey hair; cheeks covered with stubble. Restless, shifting feet. She wanted to chat: Nita, what caste do you belong to? Which village are you from? How many children ...

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[1] term used by servants to address their masters. (A term of respect in the Persian language.)

[2] a servant or personal attendant, provided to a high-ranking official. The services of the chaprasi were part of the privileges which accompanied the position.

But Balidatta, who had walked away, was impatiently stamping his feet. "Nitai!" he shouted, elongating the "a" in his name: "Nitaai! Come here!"

"Huzoor?" Nitai wailed, rushing to his side.

"You are the chaprasi?"

"Yes, huzoor."

"How long have you served?"

"Twenty years, huzoor."

"Twenty years!" Balidatta shouted. His stifled anger erupted all at once. "Twenty years! And you still haven't learnt anything, old man! The train came, it left, but you were standing there, relaxed like a nawab.[1] You did not help us with the luggage. And now you stand there gossiping, you opium eater!"

This was the beginning! This was how they behaved and spoke, those whom he had always dreamt of emulating. The men of steel.

"Now go! You will have to learn! Everything is slack around here! The Company will not tolerate this, I tell you! If you don't improve, I'll have you dismissed, old man. You don't know me yet!"



Nitai was whisked into life. Every part of his body had been rudely jarred. He had pinned his trust on a certain strategy and it had failed. His livelihood was threatened! His limbs trembled to obey, but they lacked co-ordination. His feet flew in one direction and his hands in another. Grimacing, gesticulating, he ran towards the waiting cart. The cart driver was rolling a smoke out of raw tobacco leaves. Contorting his face, Nitai poured out all the abuse that he had received, adding interest to principal.

"You ..." he began, launching into a colourful description of the cartman's parentage.

The cartman, who had been sitting idle for some time, took up the challenge happily, his face lighting up. "Whaat!" he shouted, "The cart-hire hasn't been settled; I have yet to see a copper coin — and just look at his temper! Watch your tongue!

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[1] a Muslim noble or feudal landlord, whose title and lands were a gift from the king.

No one is in your debt and no one has built his house on your zamindari[1] estate! Abuse me, will you? Just look at him!"

The battle raged. Nitai's hands whirled like a top; a rich arsenal of verbal armaments, from a variety of sources, was on display. A crowd gathered. Meanwhile, Balidatta had dragged his luggage, unassisted, across the platform. Sarojini was taking a stroll. The coolies buzzed around Balidatta in a swarm, bargaining for higher wages. The cartman drove off, fuming: "Some babu! As if I've never seen a babu before!"

Nitai returned, lathered with the sweat of battle.

Balidatta's temper was rising. He walked out of the station. There was another bullock cart in the distance — the only one in sight. The cartman had been waiting.

"How much?" Balidatta began.

"Three rupees."

"Two? All right, let's go. Here, chaprasi, load these things on the cart!"

"Huzoor!"

"Is the house ready?"

"Huzoor."



The new officer had found self-expression, on that new morning.

The chaprasi knew the ritual.

Sarojini looked around curiously. This was her new home! The front garden, the vegetable patch at the rear. Large rooms. Truly a spacious home.

She climbed out of the cart and took a stroll around the house. Her belongings had been piled on the front verandah. How swiftly the house had accepted its new occupants! She was busy making her plans: this would be her bedroom, that, her sitting room. Store-room there, kitchen here. Nitai had carried the luggage indoors and was panting from the exertion.

"I've arranged a servant-boy for you, Ma," he said. "Belongs to a good caste. Shall I bring him?"

"Do you need to ask?" Balidatta said. "Bring him at once! He won't be expensive, will he?"

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[1] the estate or lands gifted by the ruler of the country ( or the British government) to a rich landlord ( the zamindar).

"Whatever huzoor wishes to pay."

Balidatta was still dizzy from the excitement of settling in.

"You simpleton," he said to Nitai affably, "you know the saying, don't you? 'When buying a cow, make sure its colour is black and its tail long; make sure its appetite is small and its yield large.' "

"How wise huzoor is!" Nitai said. "Truly, another King Yudhisthira,[1] Ma."

He walked closer to Sarojini and spoke in a whisper, loud enough for Balidatta to hear: "He's a very strict officer, Ma. Not like the last one. He knows how to get the work done. A demon for work! The Sahib will love him!"

"Will you unpack my clothes?" Balidatta said to Sarojini, "I'll go and meet the Sahib."

"Your bath and breakfast?" she asked.

"My clothes first. You don't understand. This is a new posting."

She gave him his office clothes. He pulled them on hurriedly in the adjoining room.

"Shall I fetch the servant, Ma?" Nita asked.



A servant! The dream that had turned sour.

"No, Nita," she said. "Why do we need a servant? There are only the two of us. I can manage. And you are there to help."

"But what will people say, Ma? They'll wonder why the new officer has no servants. Is he an ordinary person? Can anybody dare to talk against my babu while I'm around? I'll bite their heads off! Or else, there's hardly any work to speak of. If I hadn't grown old and rheumatic, I could have done everything myself. By your grace, Ma, I've served many babus in this very house: I've cooked for them, swept the house, chopped firewood. I am not well these days, Ma, but when I recover you'll see how I can work!"

"Who was here before us, Nita?" she asked.

"Eighteen babus I've worked for in this house, Ma," he said. "Four of them died here."

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[1] one of the central characters in the *Mahabharata*, the great Hindu epic, renowned for his righteousness and devotion to truth.

"Died!"

"Died, Ma. Who is accountable for births and deaths? Birth and death will go on. By your virtue, I too will close my eyes one of these days; my only prayer is that my days may end in the service of my babu and my Ma. All my life I've served officers; can death come to me in any other way? Yes Ma, four of them departed in this very house; I escorted their families back to their villages. Moreover, two of them lost their daughters-in-law here and one lost his wife; I can't remember how many children died. I had to cremate them and take the purifying bath. What could I do? When duty calls I'm never one to hold back! I've got certificates to prove it, Ma; I'll show them to you."

"Can we rent some other house, Nitai?

"What for, Ma? This house is very convenient—it's close to the office and the market, and you don't have to pay rent."

"But you say many people died here!"

"People have to die, Ma. That's God's law. But you can't give up your home because of that. Now look, Ma: this earth, on which we are sitting now—who knows what's inside it?"



"What!"

Sarojini's eyes grew large. What was he saying! She shivered.

"No, Ma, what I was saying is this: so many people die; where do they all go? Into this earth, where else! The whole world is a graveyard. This soil is mixed up with everyone's flesh and bones. With my own hands I've deposited them all—father, mother, wife, two children. Now I'm a leafless tree. Where did they go? Into this earth! And this earth of ours—the holy books say it's made of some demon's bones. We build our houses over these bones; we take the sap from these bones to grow pumpkins, gourds, bitter gourds; we eat them; the same juice goes into tomatoes, potatoes ..."

"That's enough, Nitai. Don't say more!"

"It's nothing, Ma. Rice, millets, lentils—everything grows from the same flesh and bones. What we eat, therefore ..."

" Oh, stop ! I'll never feel like eating again."

"I know, Ma : one loses one's appetite. That's why I eat so little. I tell myself, I'm eating somebody's flesh and blood.

But what can you do ? That's the way this world is. You can't survive unless you eat somebody else's flesh !"

"Oh ma !"

All she could see around her were piles of bones, heaps of flesh. The innocent earth had turned into a nightmare ! Nitai saw the look in her face and rejoiced. There would be no more happy dreams ! The wife of the mighty officer was a mere woman, frightened out of her wits.

"This is the only wisdom, Ma," he went on. "The world is nothing but arrival and departure. If you think about it, it makes you want to give up everything. Don't think so deeply, Ma ; it's God's will, we can do nothing. Shall I get the servant, Ma ?"

"Oh yes, yes, Nitai. Fetch him. It's so lonely here."

" And I think you should also have a servant girl, Ma. Such a big house this is; how empty it will look unless there are people in it. The babu and I will be out on tour most of the time ; somebody should be here. I'll find a girl for you very cheaply; all you need to give her is food and three rupees a month."



"Get two, Nitai " Sarojini said. " The salary isn't much !"

" Don't worry about the money, Ma. Leave that to me. Gold grows on this land ! The babu need not know; how does it concern him ? I am the one that arranges everything! So many babus have worked here: what didn't they eat; what didn't they drink? The money is measured here in baskets, Ma. I will do everything, Ma; you needn't care about anything. Only, when the ladies from neighbouring houses come to visit you, you should say to me in their hearing: 'Nitai, there's no rice in the house. Could you ask the grocer to give us some on credit ?' And our babu should ask the clerks in the office to loan him some money each month."

"You mean we should hire servants on borrowed money ?"

" Only for show, Ma ; only to show others. Let them think you are always short of money. People have such jealous eyes that you can't survive unless you throw dust into them."

She could not reply; too many thoughts came crowding to her mind. This was a new grammar she was learning. But surely, what Nitai was telling her couldn't be right!

## TWENTY-ONE

Mr Shaw.

The sound represented by the letter "sh" has a very special place in the Oriya language. Through the ages, it has symbolised the sweetest and most endearing of relationships. It is a shorthand for a certain term of kinship which has universal application: friends use it to indicate the depth of their friendship; the ploughman uses it to address his bullock and the labourer his wife, although it was intended originally for the wife's brother. Everyone uses it for everyone else.

But there was nothing endearing about Mr Shaw: tall, stout, dark as midnight, with a face like the blade of a shovel, sombre, coarse and brutal. His hair, cut short, resembled the spikes of a kadamba[1] flower; the eyes were like glass and his thick lips twisted in a perennial sneer. An unnaturally thick neck, which could swivel around all of a sudden and angle itself menacingly. Hands like paws; a belly like an earthenware pot in which paddy is stored. There was a certain feral alertness in his posture, as if he was about to pounce.



He reminded one of the khalifa[2] who trained young wrestlers in the mud pit. But the khalifa in his ominous maturity, not in his exuberant prime.

His arrogance, fed on a diet of servility, had grown; so too had his bitterness, fanned by domestic conflict. The quest for the daily bread had taken its toll, leaving the consciousness smouldering.

Such a person can provide no shade; there is nothing public or universal about him. His stride makes the earth tremble, his voice puts roosting birds to flight and his wrath causes men to whimper for mercy; what public existence can he have ? If he glances at other human beings at all, it is to grab, not to share.

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[1] a beautiful fragrant flower

[2] an expert gymnast, a teacher of the art.

He has no experience of looking at others. All he can see are lifeless dolls; he inhabits a world of dolls, which are his sport. This one's head is wrenched off and joined to that one's broken trunk; this one lies prostrate, feet up and head down; that one is shattered into a thousand fragments. Having wrought chaos in Dolls' land, he smiles in triumph.

Mr Shaw had started life as plain Sahu; in his Western incarnation he had assumed a new name, three-piece suits, top hat, walking-stick and cheroot. But only for public display.

He was a senior executive in the Company—the head of this vast establishment.

Now he sat enthroned in his office, mountains of files piled high in the wooden shelves on either side. Each represented a major problem awaiting his attention. The room was large; a thick curtain hung over the door. Illumination came from a table lamp on Mr Shaw's desk; he was opposed to natural lighting. Across the desk was an ancient wooden chair, with arms, for the chance visitor; next to that was another chair, with one missing arm, and next to it a wooden stool. If the visitor was determined to find a seat he could be offered one, in keeping with his status; most visitors, however, were kept standing.



One corner of the room was screened off by a thick canvas partition, six feet high, mounted on a wooden frame. Behind the screen sat an enamel chamber-pot and a wooden "thunderbox", further symbols of his anglicised reincarnation. The acrid stench of urine stood out clearly among the various dank odours. Behind another screen, in another corner, on a table, was a tiffin-carrier containing his lunch, together with a flask of tea. A towel hung from a wooden rack; there was even a mirror, in case Mr Shaw needed to carry out emergency repairs to his appearance.

Mr Shaw sat writing. He gripped his pen firmly and pressed it down hard on the paper as though wrestling with it. The muscles of his face grew tense and a variety of expressions flickered across it—expressions of violence, anger or shrewd alertness.

Suddenly, the huge fist came crashing down on the brass calling-bell, which shrieked in terror. The chaprasi, who had been dozing on his bench near the door, leaning against the

wall, leapt to his feet and rushed into the office, salaaming and bending from the waist.

"Huzoor ?"

"Call him in, you idiot!" Mr Shaw roared, without looking up.

"Huzoor !"

The chaprasi darted out of the room with the speed of an arrow, dazed. Rows of clerks sat behind their tables; the junior officials in their cubicles and at one end, the Head Clerk. "Call him in!" the Sahib had ordered. But whom ?

With a flash of inspiration, the chaprasi now ran to the Head Clerk. This was the mascot that could shield them all from misfortune.

"Bara Babu, the Sahib sends you his salaam", he said.

And in a flash the Head Clerk scrambled to his feet and rushed towards the Sahib's office, buttoning up his coat with a practised hand as he ran. The Sahib was still writing. He waited.

The eyeballs, but not the head, rose to confront him.

"Have you done it ?"



Inadvertently, he blurted out, "Done what, sir ?" regretting the query in the same breath.

"Done what ?" the Sahib roared. "How many times do I have to tell you? This makes the sixteenth reminder. Is it done or not ? Answer me!"

The Head Clerk said hurriedly, " Almost done, sir. I worked on it all night."

"Not done yet ? All right, go. What a bunch of idlers you are!"

The Head Clerk retreated, head downcast and tail between his legs. The moment he was out of the Sahib's office he heaved a sigh of relief. He had no idea what the Sahib had referred to; there were at least a hundred matters being processed. He had blundered in admitting that "it" had not been completed.

Questions were being asked all the time and answers had to be given. Sometimes there were telegrams in the middle of the night: "Report urgently the total number of bullocks in the various depots in your region" ; "Report nature of pests affecting tobacco cultivation this year." Telegrams had to be sent off immediately in reply. If he were to delay the replies

until the truth could be ascertained he would not last very long as Head Clerk.

Now Mr Shaw was alone in his office.

The pen ploughed its furrow across the paper, halting occasionally.

Outside, there was a wedding procession. The warbling of the pipes floated into his ears. That piper is good! A wave seemed to waft him away into some remote past.

He grew irritated. Oh, this unending rigmarole, this dreary rhythm: being born, getting married and then dying. How annoying! Outside, the same old commotion, the uproar of the marketplace. The endless scurrying to and fro, the complaints and disputes, the misery and suspicion, each one trying to hide his selfish interests behind the folds of his garment, intent on his own purpose.

The wedding procession in the distance, the boom and thud of fireworks in the afternoon, the untiring drone of the pipes.

Must have drunk a potful.

Endless, like a row of lumbering, creaking bullock carts, one behind the other. Disgusting!



Damp, soggy, like the unending, brooding rain — this dismal life. And still, men wallowed like pigs in the mud, rooting for happiness.

How enchanting the pipes sounded in the distance. His mind quivered, shaking itself free.

Let life go on. The pen hovered motionless; the neck was tilted to one side. A cynical half-smile hung on his lips. Shadows of memories flickered across his half-conscious mind — red, blue, violet, yellow streamers of light bubbling up like sparks. The conscious mind warned: beware! This is false, this is weakness!

You are the dictator in this office.

One kick could send the destinies of a hundred underlings flying. All were chained to the daily bread. Proud heads bowed low when the grain of rice was threatened. Strong men crumpled in tears. The closest of friends turned into implacable foes, snarling and snapping, when an extra morsel was thrown into someone's plate.

He had seen fresh, bright-faced youths come trooping in, eyes sparkling with hope, hearts bursting with enthusiasm, with poetry in their strides. Two days under the yoke, a few brushes with the reality of the bread-line, and the flower drooped. Youth turned senile; cheeks became gaunt, leathery. Hurt, dull eyes, afraid to look up, tried to conceal the pain of capitulation. After that, a mere cog in the wheel: alive neither to sunrise nor sunset. All joy, the pleasure of reading a book or gossiping idly with a neighbour, would vanish. A cog, sitting down when told, rising on command, flocking together to salaam, chanting hymns of praise in hollow tones. A single thought would control each consciousness: the need to push ahead in the queue for that extra grain of rice. Another morsel, Sir, one more handful, oh God!

He was no stranger to this other existence. His bride had come to him with alta-dyed feet, trailing clouds of dark hair: a goddess. Privation turned her into the roaring demon-goddess of the cremation ground, reeking of death, tending her afflicted, semi-human brood. Together, in their anger and hatred, they had been veritable agents for the God of Death: "Hail, O Death! Death *is*; Life *isn't*. Come, oh Death! Hasten!" The mother would shriek " Die, die, die" while her offspring danced to the rhythm.



And now, a dictator! Ha, ha, ha! Wielding the god Indra's thunderbolt! What sweet revenge, oh life!

The wedding procession was far away now. The piping had faded into a distant, occasional sob.

Carried on the wind, like a wave from the other side.

It had no overpowering rhythm, unlike the brass band of a military parade: it did not assault the wind or rake up the earth with the stamp of marching feet.

Only an echo, floating on the wind. A forgotten ancestral tune from the village. Now tantalisingly close, now distant.

It did not bind; made no attempt to capture. Only touched and vanished; tickled and vanished again. Hid among the thickets with a sudden tinkle of laughter. Grew distant once more.

It was without pattern, featureless.

And yet the mind ran in pursuit. The consciousness remained watchful, waiting to gather up fragments of the shattered past.

It seemed like yesterday. The spell of the retreating pipe brought everything into sharp detail: the clumps of trees, the shower of mango blossoms, the pale evening sun tracing crooked, yellow shadows on the bald earth, the stacks of straw piled high in the harvested fields, the vivid green creepers trailing along the hedgerows, with the bright yellow flowers peeping through the leaves. The new straw thatch on the huts, the most yellow of all — the colour of spring.

What peace there was, when one could snatch a moment from the foul-mouthed, book-learned city! Rows upon rows of cool, thatched huts; paddy-fields stretching into the distance, mango orchards. Underneath that canopy of unending time, life moved imperceptibly but surely.

It was simple, transparent, unclouded by suspicion.

"Hey Sahu, are you at home ?"

Hey Sahu, not Mr Shaw.

" Come, sit; have a paan. Get the paan box, I say!"

The endless dawdling of idle conversation, the unhurried smearing of lime on paan leaves, the hypnotic thuk, thuk of betel nuts being cracked, the lazy opulence of pungent, home-roasted tobacco sprinkled liberally on the paan, folded and tucked away, dissolving deliciously, only to be replenished with another.



To savour idly the indolent ways of the village, where the ancient heart of the land still throbbed, lazy but unceasing, century after drowsy century. Where the feverish hands of the clock caused no panic; no motor cars raised pillars of dust; no railway timetables caused travellers to hurry and hustle and pant and puff, stumble and rise and scamper again.

Only to stare, to understand, to feel on one's pulse the heart-beat of the commonplace, which is not to be read in books. For it is written into the blood of the tribe.

Only to listen. To the joyous lyric which opens, at dawn, with the pounding of rice. Then the boiling of paddy in vats. The drying of baris, little cakes of rice and lentil flour on straw mats, in the mellow winter sun. The painting of muruja[1] patterns on mud floors, from powdered rice and coloured earth.

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[1] decorative designs, usually floral or geometrical, painted by women on the walls and floors of houses with rice flour and dyes.

The chattering of young girls by the village pond; the endless shuffling from one neighbour's home to another; the slow, unending routine of household tasks. Bamboo fires, leaf fires, glowing softly, never blazing forth. The pot of rice kanji[1] in one corner, narrating its own timeless tale of unhurried, languid existence. Each home had its store of kanji brew, ten to fifteen years old. Treasured carefully, beneath the dust of ages, the precious odds and ends of the household. The pot of dried mango kernels, preserved for years, to add flavour to the simple curry.

" Hey Sahu, won't you join us for a walk ?"

The young bull prancing among the herd, in the blazing sun. You watch, fascinated, unaware of evening's arrival. The nesting crow carrying twigs away. Here too, the sheer intoxication of observing, of comprehending. Little boys catching dragonflies. A butterfly floats away. Spectators returning from the village opera. Relatives arriving in procession from a neighbouring hamlet, bearing gifts of sweetmeats in intricately decorated earthen pots; trailing them, the son-in-law, in festive finery, carrying on his shoulder a little child dressed in red, staring in round-eyed wonder.



In that past lay Mr Shaw's roots — the secret of his gradual unfolding on that day of retreat.

He sat up with a start. "Damn sentimental nonsense!" he muttered to himself. The lips contorted viciously; the eyes narrowed; the whole world was his enemy once more.

Work was his revenge. Suddenly, he remembered an urgent problem that he had been mulling over. He had to stoke up his fires. He lit his first biri, sucking the poisonous fumes directly into his blood-stream, feeling the capillaries of his brain dilate, engorge, dance with animation. Within an hour, he would burn up a whole bundle; the remains would overflow the metal pan on the floor. The ritual began. The clerks, in the common office outside, peeped in through the cracks in the door and retreated. It was forbidden to disturb the Sahib while biris were being smoked, for everyone knew, this was when decisions of the gravest import were taken.

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[1] rice gruel.

In the corridor outside, Balidatta presented a chit of paper, bearing his name, to the Sahib's chaprasi.

"Wait!" the chaprasi ordered. " Can't you see, the Sahib is smoking biris. No one can see him now."

The chaprasi had taken off his turban, his crown of authority, and deposited it on the bench, next to himself. He too was smoking a biri. From time to time he glanced contemptuously at Balidatta, who was pacing up and down the corridor. Occasionally, he could hear a growl emanating from the Sahib's room, muffled and yet terrifying. Each time, he would spring to his feet, quickly put on his turban, deposit the biri where the turban had been and make a dash for the curtained door; each time, he returned to his bench and resumed his biri. Balidatta looked at him enviously and continued his pacing. It was as difficult to stay as to leave.

Half an hour, one hour, an hour and a half elapsed. The newly arrived officer was still pacing up and down, repeatedly pulling up his sleeve to examine his watch. As though he expected to make a startling discovery each time. Enforced meditation on the passage of time had given him a new awareness.



He was growing restless, particularly because of the chaprasi's insolence, but he never lost hope. He knew how to wait—or else he could never have achieved anything. Another gentleman, elaborately attired, had arrived for audience with the Sahib. He too had handed in a slip of paper, with his name, to the chaprasi and was now measuring the length of the corridor with slow, deliberate steps, but moving in the opposite direction from Balidatta.

Good, let the two babus walk with their faces averted from each other. The chaprasi was enjoying the spectacle. Now he pulled out his cloth pouch and busied himself in preparing paan, with an occasional glance at the two gentlemen. Sometimes, he detected an inquiry about to be made, but one gesture of that gnarled hand was enough to bring the traffic in the corridor to a halt. Then, he returned to his paan-making. Let the babus stroll!

He felt his own importance growing by the minute. He had ripened on the job; his eyelashes were white, his eyes the colour of lead. Grey moustaches that had been disciplined into an upright stance. A gigantic, peaked turban on his head; a

long, scarlet tunic, like the costume worn by actors in the village jatra.[1] Across his chest was a diagonal band, six inches in width, on which was displayed the glittering brass shield bearing the Company's emblem. The Sahib was within; the visitors were outside, waiting. He alone stood between them. It was a situation to be relished.

Balidatta walked up to him and pleaded softly: " Please, won't you go in and have a look?"

"H'm!"

"Please go, it's very urgent! The Company's time is being wasted. The Sahib will be angry if he finds out I've been waiting."

The chaprasi was amused at his naivety. His lips curled in a faint smile, then straightened. He would not allow any weakness to mar his solemnity. Shaking his head gravely, he said: "Don't you know, he is a tiger!"

"What ?"

"A man-eating tiger!"

Balidatta felt his blood drying up. Perhaps the entire episode had been staged to make the visitor feel helpless, shrivelled up. By the time he went in he would be reduced to nothing.



Suddenly, the bell rang out. A voice thundered: " Koi hai! *Who's there?*"

Instinctively, the chaprasi sprang to his feet and dashed into the Sahib's room. Balidatta heard him cry out, in a tone of utmost devotion: "Huzoor!"

Balidatta's heart raced with anticipation. Has the moment arrived; is this the moment ? he thought. The words reverberated in his mind: "Koi hai!" — the magic wand with which the British master summoned his native slave, and the instantaneous, instinctive response: "Huzoor!" Sweat poured down his face; he had to lean against the wall for support.

The message arose from some obscure recess of his consciousness: he was about to be called! His feelings were in total disarray; an unknown fear gripped his limbs. Beyond those doors was the Sahib: Lord and Master of his destiny. One stroke of his pen could destroy, or redeem. Oh, the daily bread! How

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[1] an opera, a dramatic performance in the open air; a festival.

miserable, how utterly insignificant he was! The daily bread. Clutching, entwining, suffocating, like the tentacles of some deadly carnivorous plant. Gripping him by the throat, drying up the saliva. He drew out his handkerchief and scrubbed his face dry, trying to calm himself; still, he was terror-stricken, the sacrificial goat. And, truly, in a moment, the chaprasi emerged and signalled: he had been summoned.

He staggered to the door and pushed the curtain aside, as if driven by a storm, stepped inside and gazed into the dim distance, bowing low and reciting his prayer of supplication:

"Good morning sir, Your Honour!"

And from a distance came the response: " Sit down!"

Sit down? To sit down, he would have to approach. Should he? He gaped.

The Sahib was engrossed in his file.

"Sit down, do you hear?"

The sheer power of the command gripped him by the shoulder and pressed him down. And Balidatta, dressed in suit and tie, found himself sinking to the floor, capsizing under the storm of that thunderous "Sit down!"



"Idiot!" the Sahib roared out. "Come here!"

The goat went to the sacrifice, trembling, his ears ringing.

The Sahib was examining the slip of paper with Balidatta's name. From the paper to Balidatta and from Balidatta to the paper his eyes moved, matching one to the other, scrutinising him from the top of his head to the soles of his feet.

Balidatta quivered uncontrollably; still quivering, he began his recitation in ungrammatical English: he had arrived, he was reporting for work, he would labour with unremitting zeal and dedication, he craved the Sahib's forgiveness in case he should err, and so on.

The Sahib listened. For five minutes. Then he said: "Yes!"

"Yes," to Balidatta, conveyed acquiescence; he did not know that in the Sahib's idiom "Yes" signified dismissal. He remained standing.

The Sahib asked gravely: " What do you want now?"

"I've come to pay my respects, Your Honour!" he said.

"Well, you have paid your respects," the Sahib said. "What more?"

"Nothing, sir", Balidatta said.

"Then don't stand there staring like an idiot," the Sahib said. "Go and do your work!"

Balidatta suddenly grew animated. "Huzoor!" he exclaimed.

"Get out!" the Sahib said. "Yes!"

Under the jolt of that "Get out!" he rushed out with a bound. His self-respect lay rolling under the Sahib's feet. The chaprasi accosted him the moment he left the Sahib's office.

"My baksheesh?" he said.

His personality had been bruised; but now, in the open, the fresh air revived him. You are an officer! he reminded himself repeatedly. He was no ordinary mortal; he possessed great distinction, extraordinary skills. The clerks, row upon row, sat caged in their pigeon-coops; so many faces, so many appearances! He was a superior being. Some day, at some golden hour, he would preside over their destinies. Someone's daily bread would dangle from the tip of his pen!

They were looking at him with curiosity, whispering ...



One more hour, and then everyone would find out. He would be known, not merely in this office, but elsewhere, in the city. Visitors to the city would carry his fame to remote villages.

Once out in the open, striding down that wide corridor, making the office echo to the clatter of his shoes, the injury that he had just suffered, behind the privacy of those doors, faded. Feelings that had lain brooding in the caverns of his mind were delivered up into the vast, clear outer space where nothing mattered except cause and effect, goals and means.

Measured by those scales, Balidatta realised, his injury was of no consequence. What had he suffered after all? During his life as a clerk he had witnessed a great deal. All that could happen behind curtained doors, hidden from other eyes: the glorious reception that was dished out even to eminent men, the frown before the storm, the blood-curdling thunder, the inconceivable abhorrence of foul language. These were never recorded on paper; they never crossed the limits of those curtained doors. Powerful men, crushed and humiliated, could step outside, shake away the hurt and say, with unclouded

faces: "The Sahib received me most cordially—asked about my welfare. What affection, what sympathy!"

This was the secret. If each defeat had to be acknowledged, accepted meekly, there would be no hope at all of victory. But if a defeat could be proclaimed a victory, if an insult could be celebrated as an achievement, one could go far. He would have to learn not only to point his umbrella at the rain but also to turn his back into stone. And what was so difficult about that? If his bosses did not revile him, who else would? Who else could?

Balidatta's face lit up with his customary office-smile. Which looked like a smile, even if it wasn't.

And as he walked to meet the Head Clerk, (that divine ox which is the great Lord Shiva's vehicle[1], in every office across the land) his confidence returned. Yes, he would be able to play the tune. He would know how to fiddle and make the mountain bear dance—no matter how fierce it might be.

The Head Clerk is not an officer in rank; for all his importance, he is a mere clerk. Many officers tend to look on the Head Clerk with contempt because he is an outcaste, not one of them. But Balidatta Das, lifelong student of Success, had learnt his lessons in a different school: he knew what any office, any institution, owes to the despised clerk. The battered, rundown, unshaven clerk, slaving from dawn to midnight on a half-empty stomach, poring over thick files at home by lantern light, spreadeagled on a straw mat, whose salary has run out by the fifteenth day; whose horizon is confined to the office file; whose family life is one unending saga of want and frustration, who leaves behind not only his yoke but his very existence, at the end of the day, on that well-worn office table. The clerk is the architect who creates the monument of red tape; the officer merely signs where he is told.

He knew, if the lesser deity in the front office was appeased, the Supreme God in the inner sanctum would bless him as



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[1] in Hindu mythology, Shiva, the Supreme God, is represented as riding on a bull. Each god has a different animal as his "vehicle" (vahana, in Sanskrit), which is worshipped along with the god.

Here, the Head Clerk in the office is referred to as the vehicle of the all-powerful "boss," since proximity to the boss makes him an object of terror among clerks.

well. And if he wasn't! What calamities threatened! The clerk's prowess is not attested in any file. What becomes manifest is only the end result: imprinted on the office typewriter, signed by the Sahib.

And so: "Greetings, Bara Babu! How are you? I've just arrived; and the first person I thought of meeting was you! Ha! Ha!"

And the Bara Babu, rising: "Oh, sir, is it you? Please be seated. Get a chair, you idiot (to the office chaprasi)! Have a seat, sir — why, you're still standing!"

"What does it matter? This is home, after all! Please — you must sit down, I insist! So many files! So much work! How hard all of you must work! Here, have one . . ." extending the paan.

"Sir, you speak of work?" the Head Clerk said. "Alas, who is there to understand my misery? Sir, there are nine departments, no less, under my charge. And the Sahib writes 'Urgent' on every file. If I don't attend to them personally nothing will ever get done. These babus (pointing at the rows of clerks), no matter how much I teach them, will get everything wrong. And if I were to send those papers up without correcting their blunders, how long would I survive?"



"I know, Basanta Babu, I know," Balidatta said, nodding sagely. "I've heard about you. You are running this office singlehanded! Officers merely sign, what else?"

And Basanta Babu, smiling in a display of humility said: "How can that be, sir? After all, we are only clerks! It is the officers like you who matter; you provide the direction!"

"Basanta Babu, your modesty shows how experienced you are. But then, you can't hide the truth from me — I was a clerk too, you know. The foot-soldier fights, and the general claims the battle, isn't that right? But really, who can possibly reward you for the work you are doing!"

And, picking up one sheet of paper out of the pile of memos, he said; "Who has written this note, Basanta Babu? You don't have to tell me, I can see from the style it's yours! Wonderful! What splendid language! If you look at it from this side, it means 'Yes'; look at it from the other side and it's 'No'! You can interpret it in at least three ways. That's the beauty of the

English language! How compact the note is! Packed solid with facts and figures! I'm sure the Sahib will have no hesitation in signing this note with eyes shut. I have much to learn from you, Basanta Babu; if you don't mind, I'd like you to come and help me, from time to time. What beautiful noting!"

Basanta Babu smiled bashfully.

What technique, what artistry he had put into those pages of coarse paper! Did anyone bother even to read his notes, much less appreciate them? All the talent, all the imagination of his working life was poured into those creations, mere notes in the margins of files though they were. What he practised was an art form, requiring a lifetime of dedication. How many ancient files he had ransacked, searching for models of bureaucratic prose to emulate in his own noting. How many manuals of office procedure he had perused and memorised! Who knew the amount of scholarship, of painstaking research, that went into each note, each Demi Official Letter?

To the uninformed, it was only scribbles on paper.

But at last, he seemed to have found someone who could understand.



Basanta Babu's heart warmed to Balidatta. With an affectionate smile, in a voice dripping with humility, he said: "The Sahib approves all my notes immediately, sir. Many a time he has written appreciative comments. I'll show you one, sir."

"Is that so?" Balidatta said. "You are a marvel, Basanta Babu!"

"This Sahib can recognise good work!" Basanta Babu said.

This was what Balidatta had been waiting for—to hear something positive about the Sahib. A true professional, he believed, must be able to discover his superior's virtues and make a habit of reciting his praises in public. And then the others would assume that he was close to the Boss, a trusted confidant. They would begin to respect him. The word would spread—even reach the Boss, in due course. There is much that one can discover, if one is so inclined: someone is handsome; someone dresses smartly; someone is a scholar; someone combines scholarship with diplomacy. And so on.

But this one was a wooden post in shape and appearance, as soft-spoken as a thunderbolt. What praise could he inspire?

"This Sahib can recognise good work!" Everything flashed through his mind — everything from "Sit down!" to "Get out!" But no, he would allow no weakness in himself. A single slip would be enough to destroy. His face shining with joy and his voice mellow with admiration, Balidatta said:

"That was exactly my impression, although I met him for only a few minutes. He can recognise merit! What a rare quality it is! We had never met before, but what respect he showed me! You know, after only three or four sentences, he said: 'You are just the kind of person this office needs!' Yes, he can recognise good work."

Basanta Babu gaped at him in silence.

Is this man insane? Mr Shaw showed him respect!

But Balidatta had warmed up. He went on: "I said, 'Sir, I'm new to this office. I may be slow to pick up a few things.' And do you know what he said? He said: 'If you have any problems, take them to our Head Clerk, Basanta Babu. He is an expert.' Not only does he know how to recognise worth, he's also extremely kind, extremely clear in his judgement."



Basanta Babu's gaping mouth closed. Why hadn't he been able to read the situation? He felt annoyed with himself. What a fool he must have looked to this Balidatta Das! To be beaten at his own game!

He suddenly burst out: "You'll find out for yourself, sir — our Sahib is a man in a million! A little harsh in his speech, sometimes. But I've known bosses who are so softspoken — they'll never strike you on your face but will kick you in the rice bowl! Our Sahib is an incarnation of mercy: he will never touch anyone's daily bread! Such knowledge, such consideration, such maturity! Unique!"

The conversation grew louder and louder.

Sometimes Balidatta, sometimes Basanta Babu and sometimes the two in chorus: both busy chanting the Sahib's praises! Reducing themselves in order to magnify him, exalting him to superhuman dimensions. The five-minute discussion had extended to twenty-five — he was wise, he was far-sighted, he was kind, he was mighty, his children were geniuses, his wife was the goddess Lakshmi incarnate, his dog was supreme among dogs, his cows were without peer in the bovine world.

Two expert minstrels, singing ballads of praise.

Or two jackals, yelping in concert, jaw to jaw.

Howls of despair, born out of the mud and slush of the quagmire that is the daily bread.

The contest went on, as it always has, through the ages.

Afternoon. A flock of stray cattle outside, grazing.

People trudging to work. Labourers, tradesmen.

A group of young boys with faces painted black and red, in clown's costumes, peaked dunce caps on their heads, dancing to the beat of drums. Ahead of them, in the procession, a huge coloured poster, advertising a newly released film.

Everywhere, the tumult of the daily bread.

Balidatta finished his conversation with the Bara Babu and left, confident that he had made a wise investment.

The Bara Babu smiled wryly to himself as Balidatta departed. One of his admirers, Dinu Babu, burst out laughing: "Bara Babu, what do you make of it ?"

"Oh, you'll get to understand everything by and by," the Bara Babu said. "But mark him well; he'll go far."

Balidatta, meanwhile, was busy meeting other important members of the staff. A new officer was expected to make a round of courtesy calls; a semblance of fraternity, forced though it was, had to be kept up. If he neglected the ritual, he would create enemies.



In the shade of ancient banyan trees, the Company's offces hummed with activity. Rows upon rows of houses, cubicle after cubicle; people everywhere. Far away, in remote places, were the farms and plantations where the raw materials were produced; the factories, belching smoke, where the Company's workmen toiled. Here, in this nerve centre where decisions were made and plans drawn up, there were only papers and files.

It was here that the great war was masterminded, the battle-lines drawn. The unending war, the hunt for the daily bread. From some it was snatched, to others it was given. Silently, inconspicuously, the market rose or fell and each rise or fall made a difference to somebody's platter of rice. In each home, the breadwinner would be sitting down to his first mouthful when the magic of the marketplace would strike and hey presto!

three fourths of the rice vanished from the plate. He never knew where it went, or how. The peasant in his ricefield, the labourer in the factory or the clerk in the office had no inkling of that magic; he never knew if it had a name. All he knew was that when prices rose, the sweat of his labour, which once fetched eight bags of rice, was worth no more than one. All he could do then was pray.

A part of that dark magic was woven in this office; other parts, in other places.

But the origins were common.

This ancient banyan had witnessed history.

The splendour of the warlike Kalinga Empire[1]. Then the renunciation of the non-violent Ashoka.[2] The mystic devotion of Chaitanyadev.[3]

The banyan had grown.

Now it was a witness to the Company's power. To a society built on commerce. The power and glory of King Bread.

Now the banyan observed Balidatta Das. Insignificant in size. Desirous of deliverance from neither wordly nor spiritual sorrow. Uninterested in salvation of the soul or union with the divine.



All he sought was rapid promotion, influence in the office, the patronage of the powerful.

What hopes he had! Striding ahead, sheltered by the ancient banyan, in quest of others like himself, others of comparable rank. Sarojini was forgotten; his home and all that it contained had faded from his consciousness. Oblivious of that vast crowd of human beings, as though it was a dark jungle and he a solitary glow-worm, flying ever upwards.

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[1] Orissa (where this novel is set) was called Kalinga in ancient times. It was ruled by powerful kings whose territories extended, as late as the 12th century A.D., to the Kaveri river, in the deep south.

[2] the great king who, several millenia before Christ, had conquered the whole of India, including Kalinga. The death of thousands of warriors in the Kalinga War saddened Ashoka so much that he renounced war, embraced the Buddhist faith and vowed to rule only through love and non-violence.

[3] the sixteenth century saint from Bengal who propagated the Vaishnava cult, enjoining personal devotion to the god Krishna. Chaitanaya Deva is said to have spent many years of his life in Puri, in Orissa, where the temple of Jagannath, Lord of the Universe, is situated. Chaitanyadev's influence on the spiritual life of Orissa has been enormous.

## Twenty-two

Mirrors confronting you, row upon row—some close, others distant. As if their distance was a measure of your age, your condition. But it was not time alone that moved; the mind had its movement too. Movement brought change, and as the mind changed so did the distances that the mirror reflected, for it was designed to reflect variance and alteration. And so, the image in the mirror was ever changing. The individuals who occupied the same rank in the Company were like different images of the same object. Balidatta glanced from one to the other, startled. These reflections were all his, all his—they showed him his future, his changing states. Once, as a child, he had paid six paise[1] for a ticket to a magic show. A tiny "Hall of Magic," within tarpaulin enclosures. Wherever you looked there were countless images of yourself. But were they yours? By some mysterious process, the various parts of your body were either magnified or diminished. The light from your body was reflected in the mirror and returned to you. What you saw was innumerable distortions of your own being. Curiosity had drawn him there; but what he discovered was terror. He had returned chastened, silent, enmeshed in the confusing web of his own thoughts.



That forgotten experience was now peeping out of the recesses of his mind. True, the circumstances were different. Each cell in the Company's edifice was peopled by its officers. Some had been there only a year; others, twenty. His recent entry into the scene had given him a sense of parity and so in each of them he saw himself. But the future that he saw reflected was out of tune with the impulses of the present. Balidatta grew confused.

But then he was able to sort things out and his self-confidence returned. Yes, he would know how to handle them: mentally,

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[1] the lowest form of Indian currency.

he trimmed some of them down to size; others he brushed aside. All these distinctions of rank and degree — they could all be his, in the future. But not all were to be desired. Of the many manifestations on show, only a few could be his ideals — qualities that he saw reflected in different persons. As for the others — well, fate might have made them officers, but in his account-book they counted for nothing. No matter who it was, no matter how exalted his rank, each showed symptoms of stupidity. They would never make it to the top.

However, they could be the rungs of his own ladder to success. He would tread over them as he climbed, without a backward look.

But before he could step on someone's shoulder he would have to place an arm around it! The contempt within would never find its way to his tongue; not in word alone but in every gesture he would be the very embodiment of charm. Like the cat in the fable, he would turn himself into every dupe's favourite disciple until it was time for him to strike!

The world is made up of two groups of people, Balidatta reminded himself: some are timber; others, fire. One group consists of the rabbits; the other, of the jackals. Some toil so that the others may feast. The wise never parade their might. He, Balidatta, would be the wisest of the wise — the plotter of his own destiny.



There would be no wavering. The end would justify the means. One who craved meat could not be afraid to kill. Who didn't desire fine food and clothes, a luxurious home and cars? But some would back away when the means were suspect. They spent their days envying others. Sometimes, they joined hands, conspiring to destroy contentment, to turn the world upside down. He had no sympathy for them. Why bother with face when the belly was hungry? Sooner or later one had to come to terms with one's objectives: the earlier one accepted them and carved out one's own trail the better it would be. The best means were those which yielded the quickest results. Let the envious brood write books, search in vain: it did not matter. He, Balidatta Das, was born to enjoy; he would take all that life and the Company had to offer; let the others think what they pleased.

Why, if one looked closely, the same philosophy flourished even at the highest levels. If means alone had mattered the Company would not be what it was; politics would not be the battle of wits it was.

All these moral scruples concerning means were only for public display. Balidatta had never been able to see himself more clearly than among that crowd of officers of every variety. His speech might be fawning and his conduct obsequious but within himself he could experience the warmth of glory. The sheer humiliation of the past lay spread out before him, like a page from a book. He would set things right.

Triumphantly he marched on. This was Jagat Babu's office.

"Good morning, sir, I'm Balidatta Das. Reported this morning. I've come to pay my respects."

Elderly Jagat Babu had climbed two rungs of the ladder and then run to seed.

"Welcome," Jagat Babu said. "You've come just as I'm preparing to go—I retire next month. Been here thirty years. Came in during Wilson Sahib's days; he sent me to our paint factory. Well, you're just a young man—could be my grandson! Now it's your turn; I'm off. All I can look forward to is my pension and a bonus. How quickly the days have gone, like water! Seems like yesterday. All my days spent. And what have I been able to achieve? To keep? The ancestral home broken; the lands turned barren. All in the first few months of my service. Things were cheap then. I was able to buy a small piece of land and a house in this town. Worth twenty times the price now. That's all my savings amount to. Ha, ha, ha!"

The toothless jaws were grinning—ha! ha! Like an innocent child. Balidatta could not help being charmed. Specially as there was no rivalry, no jealousy here.

He saw an old man, large, broad-boned, still strong of limb. Thick glasses. Wide forehead, glistening. Serenity on the face. Hair turned partly grey. The body not yet broken. As if old age was only youth in a new disguise.

Also in the room was a ripe old clerk his face round as a ball and long drooping moustaches. Squinting through the glasses dangling at the end of his nose he said: "Who says you've saved nothing, sir? Your virtues are your bank balance! Your children

lead contented lives; your daughters found good homes, your sons are well-settled, highly respected. What is more valuable than dharma[1]?"

Jagat Babu laughed. "All this talk of dharma—are you going to book me a place in heaven? We're no saints—just ordinary mortals trying to do our duty. I entered this service with Govinda's name on my lips ; now, I leave everything behind but His name. He will judge."

"Sir, who hasn't heard of you?" Balidatta said. "Others are respected only while they have authority, but your praises will be sung even when you're no longer in this office. Can virtue be denied?"

"Yes, but it's too early for you to be talking about such things, young fellow" Jagat Babu said. "By the way, I hope you don't mind my being so familiar?"

"I wish you'd talk to me as you talk to your sons," Balidatta said.

Jagat Babu patted him on the back and said "I wish you a long life! A clever boy like you, you're bound to rise. What you've been able to learn in a few years I couldn't in a lifetime! I've remained stupid."



The old clerk was smiling through his whiskers. Surprised, Balidatta exclaimed: "What?"

"No, I shouldn't reveal any secrets," Jagat Babu said. "But I'd advise you—no hollow talk of dharma. It'll only make you weak."

"You think I can be a success? " Balidatta asked.

"Why not?" Jagat Babu said. "Most certainly! Each one will achieve what he has laboured for."

The cat in the fable! "Sir, won't you give me a few tips?" Balidatta said. "Some hints? Thirty years of invaluable experience?"

"Of course I will!" Jagat Babu said. "With my blessings. May you become all that I couldn't!"

Respect for the old man was growing—the broken old man, what was he thinking? Regret for the past? Or was it just a daydream?

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[1] the complex code of Hindu ethics underlining the importance of duty and right conduct.

"Listen son, to the colourful story of my life. The past always looks beautiful, doesn't it? Because it's sunset! Ha! Ha! But then, what do you expect me to tell you? Each one has his own arithmetic; each one's tips are for himself. Only the monkey's owner knows how to make it dance! What help will my tips give you? I entered the Company's service to work, and work I did. I had no other interest. The world outside is unfamiliar. What tips can I offer? But yes, I remember, in those early years, I too was determined to climb to the top. For a time I tried the usual tricks. But gradually, I lost interest. Let me tell you a small incident. I had learnt riding, in order to look smart. The Company had given me a mare. Once, the Sahib and I went out on tour together. He was riding a stallion. On the way, the Sahib's horse came charging at me, with both forelegs in the air. My mare was uncontrollable. What a calamity it could have been! But God has been kind."

And Jagat Babu burst into a roar of laughter.

"Small things like that sound a warning—we've gone too far! Then, back to our places, nursing our wounds. That was the end of my flirtation with smartness. Later, I learnt other lessons. I learnt that nothing can be gained without a price. When you serve, you have to sacrifice your self-respect. We had a Scottish Sahib who called you the son of a pig at the slightest excuse. I caught him by the neck. I don't remember now what I did to him—but he was crying out for help. That brought the curtains down on any hopes of promotion. But they didn't dismiss me from the job—I wish they had! What advice can I give you?—ha! ha! ha! Look, if you want someone to help you, you've got to win him over through his weaknesses. What weaknesses? First, his lust. Then, his anger. In other words, you must help him to fight his enemies. Everything from sneaking and spying to physical violence. Next, his avarice. Give him costly presents. Then, his ignorance. You must prop up his illusions about himself, on which he has built up his existence. Adopt *his* values. After that, make him your deity. Adore him, serve him, sing his praises. Only then can you appeal to his sense of justice, his moral sense of right and wrong. That, in a nutshell, is the dharma of the serviceholder. But I could teach myself nothing; how can I dare teach you anything? I've failed!

Ha! ha! Well, I'm sorry I've wasted your time. Anyway, you have my blessings. May your life be peaceful!"

Jagat Babu returned to his files.

Let him be, Balidatta thought, he's yellow with age. What a relief to get away! Even the papers in that room are crumbling. Everything turning into dust. Choking. Sending shivers into your soul. Reducing your being into total insignificance.

Well, that's behind you now. Hope surged anew. Ranjit Babu: another of his colleagues. Elegant suit, glowing face, hair immaculate—a living advertisement. He was about to leave: the meeting and introductions took place in the corridor outside his office.

"You're leaving?" Balidatta asked.

"Of course," Ranjit Babu replied. "It's four-thirty now; the office closes in half an hour. Who will notice? I've done my share of the work. Go and ask any of the Sahibs—they've all seen me in the office today. In other words, I've done my rounds; met everyone. You prove your efficiency in the office by running your own life efficiently. Donkey's labour is out! You have to think of your own health, as well as the sentiments of others. I ask you: what would you prefer if you were one of our Sahibs? Would you want your underlings to come to you, when you were exhausted after the day's work, and cheer you up with small talk—or would you like them to stay away, to kneel all day in their own cubicles over piles of paper? So, if you wish to shine in your work, the secret is: *don't work*! that is, not like a bullock. What is 'super-work'? Meeting others, making friends, playing tennis with them, offering tea and snacks, finding out what each one needs and making sure he gets it! But it calls for brains. And considerable financial investment! Come, do as I advise you. Success is guaranteed! It's time for tennis. Come, be a sport!"



"I'm sorry," Balidatta said, "I have work to do."

"More work!" Ranjit Babu laughed. "Good bye then!"

He walked away swiftly.

Unthinkingly, Balidatta started to follow. But Ranjit Babu was already walking away towards his car, a cigarette between his lips.

He suddenly felt annoyed with himself. He was no more than a tortoise, he thought—a meditative tortoise!

Suddenly, the gong rang out, announcing the end of the day. Like locusts they swarmed out. He saw his chaprasi, Nitai, holding his coat and hat, with a bunch of files under his armpit. Head bowed, face contorted into a look of utter servility.

"Will huzoor walk home? Or shall I fetch a cart? Huzoor must be tired, perhaps I should get a cart."

"No, it's not far," Balidatta said. "Let's walk. We'll catch some fresh air."

"Not air, huzoor, dust!" Nitai said. "This way, huzoor!"

## TWENTY-THREE

As he neared his home, Balidatta saw the boy servant walk into the compound, carrying a basket on his shoulder. He observed the slender, light-skinned body, with its shock of unruly hair; a short, coarse, torn piece of cloth was tucked around his waist.



Nitai, who had been walking behind him, shouted "Hey, Harsha!"

Harsha turned around and prostrated himself at Balidatta's feet.

A tender face, on which was stamped an expression of unaffected helplessness that attracted one instantly. Thin, feeble hands, with small finger-nails dyed red.

"Who is that, Nitai?" Balidatta asked, pretending he did not know.

"This is Harsha, huzoor—huzoor's boy! He will do whatever huzoor commands. He is well trained, huzoor, he used to work for a police sub-inspector. Very serviceable!"

"Harsha? " Balidatta joked, "Or is it Horse? What is it, Harsha? Come!"

"Come, Harsha!" Nitai echoed. "This is your Master! You'll see what a splendid master he is. If you don't work properly, you'll have your ears pulled!" Nitai laughed.

Balidatta experienced a novel feeling of lightheartedness. Laughing, he said "Harsha, have you dyed your fingers? Come,

let me see!" Gripping Harsha's hand in his own, he squeezed the boy's fingers. Harsha blushed, like a faded lotus, biting his lips and looking up with restless eyes. Balidatta twisted his arm playfully, slapping him on the shoulder. "Oh, he seems to like dressing up! Dyes his fingers and wears his hair long! Well done! Why don't you wear a nose ring as well?"

"Huzoor," Nitai explained, "he used to be a goti pua[1] dancer. Dressed up as a girl."

"Good! We'll make him dance, if he doesn't work," Balidatta said, pinching the boy playfully. Harsha was laughing, leaping about like a frisky kitten. "Look at this loincloth you're wearing!" Balidatta said. "Will you come to work dressed like this?"

"Huzoor, what else does he have to wear?" Nitai said. "I'm sure huzoor will find something for him."

Harsha picked up his basket and walked with a swinging gait towards the house, with Balidatta following.

It was a new experience—a new sense of mastery that warmed him. A new persona which had lain hidden deep within was emerging. An unconscious response to past experience. The animal waiting to be sacrificed, forced into meekness, turns savage when it is let loose. The hurt becomes the hurter. All his life he had been the butt of other people's jokes; their merriment had been at his expense, for he was weak, vulnerable. The memory made him shudder. Now he could have his revenge; his zeal was limitless. A single body harbours a million tendencies, a million deformed impulses—crawling, swarming like varieties of germs, waiting for the right season, the right soil. A sudden whim: this Harsha was clay in his hands; he could twist, wrench, pulverise. Absent-mindedly, he entered the new being, the Sahib, that had surfaced within him.



Sarojini was waiting.

But he did not even glance at her; the new melody was echoing softly now. He stepped into his new home. Everything had been arranged, everything was in place—tables, chairs, beds, all his belongings. Slipping into a chair, he said: "Boy, take my shoes off!"

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[1] an artist in an ancient dance form in which boys enact the roles of women

Harsha squatted on the floor beside him. Balidatta deposited both his feet in the boy's lap and said: "Take off my shoes. Take off my socks."

Suddenly, he felt his limbs aching; his body needed a massage. Sarojini stood beside him, holding his change of clothing. He said "I'm tired. So much work! My whole body's aching."

Sarojini's face drooped. Putting her hand on his forehead she said "Let me see if it feels hot. No! But let's send Nita for the doctor."

"No, no," Balidatta said. "It's nothing. Just the strain. A lot of new responsibilities in this office, you know. Slight aching of the limbs, that's all. Get me some tea, will you? Harsha will give me a massage. What do you say, Harsha? Can't you massage my legs, boy? Sarojini, you can go and start your cooking; Harsha will massage me."

He changed into a comfortable lungi and stretched out on the bed and Harsha began to massage him. Timidly at first, with light fingers. Then, gathering courage, more vigorously. The tender fingers were kneading his limbs like mud. Balidatta lay spreadeagled; from time to time, he issued instructions: "Yes, that's the spot! That's where the pain is! More pressure! No, that's not it—more force! A little higher. Yes, that's it! Oh, the pain is tearing me apart!"



Little Harsha, the sweat pouring down his face, was kneading away, head lowered, eyes averted.

Balidatta was savouring the new experience. At this moment, life could offer no more. How wonderful life was! How many facets it had, how many directions! Each little bird, flying off to build its nest, driven by the same life impulse. Only those who couldn't, those who could only want and pant in envy, created rules and warnings. What else could they do? But those who were strong, those who didn't care, like him, the officers—the warnings were not for them. For them, only the comforts. Such as this. The kings, the nawabs, the aristocracy—what could ordinary mortals know of their pleasures? The wine they had drunk was poison to lesser men. Their inheritors survived, in different guises, but were just as inaccessible to the common folk. They were born to enjoy. The world could only look up and gape. They created different kinds of thirst for themselves.

Different ways of quenching them. The dogs barked but they rode past them, mounted on gilded elephants. Fear? How many examples there were, the petty burned in envy! So and so is a lusting animal; seems impervious to the laws of decency! How blatantly he passes off his mistress as his sister or daughter! And that other person? Little better than a rutting dog! Why, only the other day his wife had his head shaven and made him drink cowdung water! Must have seen something! And as for that other man, the whole town is talking! What unnatural lusts he has—as though he was a part of the alternative universe that the sage Vishwamitra[1] had created!

Let them bark.

But life! If you knew how to tilt the scales, how to skim off the cream, life could offer such a variety of flavours. Oh, good—this boy knew how to massage! Those slim fingers could talk!

With eyes half-shut, Balidatta breathed in the aromatic vapours of pleasure, quivering to the tremors of emotion, emotions unspoken, half-spoken, still-born; emotions that his mind whispered into his ears or never gave out at all. Layer by layer they rose. How swiftly he was changing! A few days earlier he would never have had such thoughts, never even imagined their existence. He would have laughed away any suggestion that the beggar's mind, stirred, could reveal, lying in some unsuspected corner, the cruel, oppressive mind-set of the rich. Only, it had never had a chance to grow.



But philosophy had never been Balidatta's weakness; his scriptures were those of the successful animal. And so, his limbs quivered to the pulse of new life.

"Don't stop, Harsha!" he told the boy. "If your hands are tired, press lightly."

The cup of tea that Sarojini had brought was getting cold. He could hear Nitai's voice in the kitchen.

Harsha stood up.

"What thin hands and legs you have, Harsha!" Balidatta said. "Why don't you grow fat? Eat well, and grow fat!"

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[1] according to Hindu religious lore, a King who performed penance in order to become a powerful sage. With these powers he tried to create a alternative heaven.

He gave Harsha's hand a playful twist. What pleasure there was in testing his own strength on those feeble limbs!

Harsha looked around with furtive eyes. "Oh, babu, you'll break my hand! Babu, ..."

"Ho, ho, ho! See how strong I am?"

"Very strong, Babu! Oh, please let go my hand!"

"Why do you act so wild? " Balidatta asked. "I say, Harsha, did you really dance in the jatra? What roles did you play?"

"The queen, Babu," Harsha said.

"Queen? Bravo! So how did your guru teach you to blink your eyes? Won't you show me? Ha, ha!"

Harsha laughed. "Do your work well," Balidatta said. "Stay on here and don't run away. I'll look after you. When summer comes we'll need a boy to pull the punkha[1] in the office. I'll get you the job. And when you're older I'll get you a chaprasi's post in the Company. Or else make you a depot clerk."

"That will be good, babu" Harsha said. He laughed again.

He was no more a stranger, an outsider. His condition had changed. Seizing the opportunity, he pushed his empty rice plate forward. "See, Babu," he said, holding the end of his ragged loincloth in both hands, "see how torn it is. If I could have one of your old cast-off clothes ..."



"You will," Balidatta said, "You'll get everything. Don't worry."

"Babu, we have no money to buy food today. If I could have two annas ..."

"All right, all right" Balidatta said, "you'll get that too!" He got up. His trousers hung from a peg on the wall and pulling two coins out of the pocket he put them on Harsha's palm, patting his back. "Take that!" he said. "You see, you got all that you asked for! Two annas! Massage my legs again tomorrow, eh?"

Harsha went away to do other jobs. Balidatta's mind was glowing: this was the first generous act he had ever performed. Two annas! He was filled with admiration for himself. Walking into the kitchen, he said to Sarojini "The boy gave me such a

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[1] the long blade like fan hanging from the roof, activating by pulling a string.

good massage! I feel energetic. Give me my clothes, will you? I'll go out for a stroll."

But the glow of generosity lingered.

"On second thoughts," he said, "I won't go! You'll feel lonely. Maybe I'll lie down for a while."

Sarojini said nothing. She *had* been feeling lonely, as she sometimes did.

## TWENTY-FOUR

Work, work, and then more work. Behind everything was the one abiding thought: what should he do to push ahead? All effort was directed to this single goal.

He had fallen easily into the routine. He scarcely went out; if he ever did, it was for some purpose. When he met someone from the office he would say, automatically:"Oh, how busy I've been all day! No time even to breathe!" And he would commence an elaborate description of all that he had been doing. People listened, but the average listener seldom stops to separate truth from falsehood when messages pass through the ears to the brain. And Balidatta, taking advantage of human psychology, exaggerated at will. He had mastered the science of bluffing. His movements were always hurried, busy. When questioned, he would say "Such pressure! Do I even have time to stand?" And if anyone happened to visit him, his house was ready the moment the visitor's voice was heard. The door opened to reveal a table strewn with paper; stacks upon stacks of files; the bottle of ink ever uncapped, the pen with its nib always moist. Gently he pushed them aside to greet the visitor: "So much work! I can't even straighten my back! You know, I've only just joined, but somehow, every important paper seems to land on my desk! What can I do? I *have* to attend to everything. The Company's interests must be looked after: millions are at stake! The Company comes first!"

Words which spoken seriously and with appropriate gesture and expression, never failed to impress.

Earlier, among the crowd of fellow-clerks, he had found few to match his single-minded devotion to Success. Even among those few, none had possessed his subtlety.

But here, among the ranks of Company executives, most were efficient. Not just Ranjit Babu; there were others, many others. Many were the tricks they knew, worthy to be stored in his lesson-book. Their strategies ranged from the subtle to the gross. Sometimes he grew restless with anxiety. What was he but a damp squib to their heavy artillery? What hope did he have? Then, once again, he returned to his struggles, casting about for tactics that would match his personality, tactics that he could afford with his inadequate size, appearance, background and financial resources.

Only the other day, the Second Sahib had come down with fever. When the Boss falls sick, it is a prime opportunity for the ambitious subordinate. Ranjit Babu fetched a basket full of grapes, oranges and pomegranates, but the penniless Balidatta found this means beyond his reach. He could only stand at the bedside with grief-stricken face, expressing silent commiseration. True, he had snatched the palm-leaf fan from the servant's hand and fanned the Second Sahib vigorously, although the Sahib's eyes were closed at the time.



Two or three times he had gone for the doctor. But the situation had called for grosser methods, of which his colleague Umesh Babu was master. Umesh Babu had the bulk and strength of a demon, and to Balidatta he appeared to have a demon's appetite and temperament. But for all his envy Balidatta had to acknowledge the sheer brilliance of Umesh Babu's stratagem. For, as the Second Sahib lay groaning in pain, Umesh Babu had extended two sturdy arms and commenced an expert massage of the Sahib's thighs and legs. Fearfully, he too had put out his puny hands to touch the Sahib's legs but Umesh Babu had swept them aside, absentmindedly, with such force that tears came to his eyes. He never made a second attempt. Then, when the Sahib's fever had shot up, causing his eyes to glow like coals and his forehead to burn like a furnace, making him roar, deliriously: "The file! Bring me the file!" So that the doctor had given orders for the Sahib's head to be held down and cold water poured over it, it was Umesh Babu who took

charge, for he was the strongest. The expression on Umesh Babu's face showed how valiantly he was wrestling with the Sahib's fever. He could do what he pleased then; all would be forgiven. What wonder if Umesh Babu became the Second Sahib's favourite?

The same Umesh Babu, though born of wealthy parents, could walk up to his superiors in the office and demand, with the affectionate insistence of a spoilt child: "Sir, I'm hungry. Please get me something to eat!" Laughing, he would gorge himself on the salted peas, vegetable fritters and nuts which they ordered for him. He could go further still: someone was made a foster-father, someone else a blood-brother. He would stretch out his hands for their old clothes or other personal belongings and say happily, without a blush: "Give that to me, sir! You have plenty!"

Such childishly endearing acts, when performed by the huge Umesh Babu, had a charm no one could resist. Balidatta could only watch and envy: these things were beyond him.

Then, there was Nirakar Babu, expert in the art of locating grooms for unmarried daughters. This talent had earned him the respect of all his superiors, although it was well known that he was a shirker. But as soon as he found an opportunity he would begin talking about prospective bridegrooms. Pulling a stack of letters out of his pockets he would say: "This one is from Ram; he's just completed his M.Sc. 'Revered Uncle,' he writes, 'please accept my humble pranams[1]' What a wonderful lad!" Words bloomed like roses on his lips as he described the eligible young men. This was his genius ; here too, Balidatta was outclassed.



On all sides he found himself confronting rivals he could never hope to match. Some were assured of promotion through matrimonial ties. Varieties of claims were established through a variety of relationships: from the central depot to the most remote outpost, the Company's activities were permeated with networks of in-laws of all description. In addition, there were claims of linguistic affinity, or caste. Groups were formed to

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[1] gesture of reverence, performed by bowing the head and bringing the palms of both hands together.

protect privileges and to these he had no entry. He could only observe that when orders for transfers were issued from Company headquarters, the transfers always seemed timed to match the auspicious dates for weddings.

Such events were commonplace in the battle for the daily bread. Balidatta brooded: it was impossible to compete here. Always, in every age, there were circumstances that frustrated the determination and ability of the mere individual.

But there were other routes, other paths. He watched those who travelled on them and made his own plans.

There was Hari Babu, valet and dog'sbody to every senior executive. He had links with their personal chaprasis, which he utilised to find out precisely what their needs were at any given time and how they could be fulfilled. Gradually, his superiors leaned on him as a blind man on his staff, and Hari Babu could get them to do whatever he wished. He could draft recommendations for himself which they would sign. From humble beginnings he had made it half-way to the top. Always cheerful and smiling, and apparently always busy. In front of his house, close to the road, stood three large structures of rough wooden slats, on which, weighted under stones, were stacks of office files, spread out for every passerby to see. And amid these files, hookah[1] in hand, sat Hari Babu, cross-legged, seemingly at work. He avoided all social gossip lest he should inadvertently leak out some secret. And if someone insisted on talking to him, he had a banal but most effective means of avoiding company: "Sorry, but I've got to go! Urgent call of nature!"



His precise antithesis was Dhaneswar Babu, slim and fair-skinned, like a golden tooth-pick. You could count the ribs on his frail chest, but he had a large head and a full, rounded face. Ears like a rabbit's, large and erect, though he was a little hard of hearing. When spoken to, he invariably responded with "Eh? What?" And this habit had given his mouth a perennial gape and an inquisitive glint to his eyes. Thick lenses covered them. Though in his early thirties, there were already clumps of grey at both temples; a thick vein stood out on his forehead. Feeble,

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[1] a smoking apparatus. The bottom portion is generally made of coconut shell.

but ever alert. The very embodiment of vigilance. Smart; he would offer you his cigarette case the moment you met. He could charm you equally with words, a smile, or a look. He insisted on playing tennis every evening though he could barely hold a racket. And each night he would play bridge with fierce enthusiasm, though he usually lost. He could start a scholarly debate on any topic on earth: music, literature, history, philosophy, politics; but ultimately, he would lose and acknowledge defeat. Then, he would sit down to sing his victor's praises. He would point out some of his virtues and offer a tribute of tea and cigarettes, leaving the victor glowing with his own triumph. The victor would be anxious to return, if only to repeat the pleasure of vanquishing him once more. This was Dhaneswar Babu's talent: his ability to excite, to incite another to attack and then to withdraw in gracious defeat. This habit of his gave his superiors a sense of mental satisfaction each time they came in contact with him; their egos relished the taste of intellectual conquest which he provided, and they grew generous. Some offered to teach him tennis; others insisted on taking him under their wings, teaching him the tricks of the trade. Their labours appeared to bear immediate fruit, for he seemed to learn effortlessly. How quick he was! They praised him; each one became his patron, eager to push him further on the road to Success. A man must be blessed, at birth, with negative qualities in rich profusion in order to attract such universal sympathy. Dhaneswar Babu *had* been so blessed; in addition, he had the gift of seeming utterly innocent. Using this shield, he had succeeded in enriching himself at the Company's expense. He had left his family behind in the village and so his home was always open to any guest. But whenever he wished, he could ask for leave to visit his family; this enabled him to deposit his acquired wealth in safe places, far away from prying eyes.



This was another model that Balidatta found difficult to emulate. There were others who strenuously invoked the assistance of the Divine: Devendra Babu, for instance, fed hordes of brahmins[1] each month, performed expensive ritual yagnas[2],

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[1] according to Hindus, a way of earning merit

[2] ritual sacrifice, in which offerings are made to Agni, the god of Fire.

made vows to his favourite goddesses. A bearded sadhu[1] was frequently seen in his home. All these were efforts to attract promotion, and promotion had, in fact, come his way.

Chandrakanta Babu was a firm believer in astrology; he patronised various practitioners of the occult arts. Some were reputed to command powerful spirits; others could read the future in the face or palm. The predictions they made never seemed to coincide but he would attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable, following every instruction, propitiating hostile planets, wearing amulets round his neck and arms, alloy rings made of eight astrological metals, handkerchieves with spells woven into them...

These were *his* avenues to promotion.

Expensive and uncertain they appeared to Balidatta. Not right for him.

But was there a way?

He searched feverishly, never losing hope.

He observed others, weighed up the different means they used, and grew frustrated. But he never slackened his efforts.

Each night, before he went to sleep, he would review the day's events: what he had done to advance his cause and what more he could have done.



He never failed to observe the strategies that others used, though most of them did not appeal to him. Only the other day, Guru Babu, who normally had stubble growing all over his face, suddenly appeared shining and clean-shaven. The permanent scowl had vanished and a new smile, equally durable, had appeared magically. In his hand was a slim book in English with a glossy cover: *A Manual of Success*. "Sir, excellent book, sir," he said, extending it for scrutiny. Underlined in red pencil was the first mantra: "Always smile!" Poor Guru Babu! Twelve years in the Company's service, in the same two-roomed quarters, and he had remained exactly where he started, though the family had grown. Battered by twelve years in the breadline, he had suddenly woken up and taught himself to smile. A crude strategy, rather like splashing mud to cover up a crack in an earthen wall. He could smile and smile for the rest of his days, it would be of no use!

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[1] wandering mendicant — often a teacher.

Gross flattery would be of no use either. Here, in this fiercely competitive arena of move and counter-move, only the most complex and intelligent of strategies were likely to succeed.

And so Balidatta pondered. Pondered until his head throbbed in agony. Following conventional as well as newly-acquired wisdom garnered from books, he used auto-suggestion. Seated under the open sky, trying to calm his mind and body, he told himself:

*The whole world is charged with life;*
*I suck in the same energy with my breath.*
*My body is filled with the same energy.*
*I am charged with life.*
*I will it: promotion will be mine.*
*I order it: wealth and success will be mine.*

His thoughts grew feverish; it was difficult to concentrate. Nevertheless, he continued to practise, each night before he went to sleep.

Of course, not everyone in the Company ranks was equally ambitious; there were some whose methods deviated from the grammar of success which he had adopted. However, success had come to them as well, early or late, in varying measure.



Divakar Babu had been a meritorious student at the university. Involvement in the Freedom Movement had prevented him from joining government service and he had joined the Company instead. At home he wore handspun clothes and wooden clogs. Some said he practised yoga, but he had never been heard propagating religion. Blunt in his talk; the fine art of diplomacy had eluded him altogether. A hard man; a tough officer, people said. He had never been known to go out of his way to please anyone. Avoided company; kept away from evening gossip. Still, you heard nothing but praise when he was mentioned; he had risen slowly but steadily and was now held up as an example in the Company.

Gatishwar Babu was combative and cantankerous, incapable of keeping an opinion to himself. Each utterance was an assault. Anyone who confronted him would be blown to bits in a barrage of incontrovertible logic. He had never learnt to bluff. He had no respect for those whom the worshippers of Success bowed to a

hundred times each day: "Scoundrel! Thief! Flatterer!" was how he referred to them. His strong, aristocratic face reinforced his words. The large, wise head, beginning to bald, inspired trust. His thick stick, tapped firmly on the ground, supported each blunt statement. He had no addictions, no indulgences, except a weakness for sweets. And yet he was immune, beyond reproach. Almost on the highest rung of the ladder.

In addition to these two, there were others, occupying intermediate positions in the Company ranks. They were producers, but lacking in salesmanship. They worked away, laboured away, with noses glued to their desks; but they had no plans, no projects for advancement. Still, some of them rose, although they probably had no time to evaluate their own progress. There was one Antaryami Babu: he had recently earned a promotion after sixteen years of stagnation. Nevertheless, he was always chubby, always cheerful. Soft-spoken and friendly, he could end any quarrel among colleagues within minutes. "I'm an optimist," he would say, "I'm like a football. The more I am kicked the higher I bounce."

Balidatta pondered about each one of them, but he never lost faith in his own science of Success. With one single argument he could sweep all of them aside: "Fate! Maybe they are born lucky!"



But he was too impatient to wait until Fate discovered him. He had to act.

Still, he was confident that his time would come. But when?

## TWENTY-FIVE

Slowly, Sarojini had grown used to being a Company wife. After all, she would have to adjust to others of her own kind. The new surroundings, strange at first, became gradually familiar, as though she had been born into them. The world is made up of different sects, different castes[1]; but new castes have arisen to replace the

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[1] Hindu society has been divided, since ancient times, into four major groups, or castes, according to profession or vocation.

traditional ones. There are no brahmins or kshatriyas now; instead, there are officers and clerks; employees of Company A and Company B; civil servants, lawyers, teachers, journalists ... Each one clings to others of his own vocation.

Sarojini knew nothing of the affiliations outside; she explored the limits of her new social group, her caste, observing, thinking. Then she returned to her home, where she had only one caste — Woman.

The house was filling up. Each day there was new evidence of Nitai's competence. In the darkness of the evening, unknown men came round to the backyard, bearing gifts. Accounts were settled with Balidatta each night. In this new game of housekeeping she and Balidatta had become partners: the voice of conscience was stifled: "After all, a person has got to *survive*!"

And so the house was filling up. Bags of rice, bunches upon bunches of plantains, cash. Both were busy gathering in the harvest.

Tiny Balidatta, now grown enormous in his own estimation, elaborated his new philosophy to his wife. "When you do it yourself, it's called ability; when others do it, it's theft. But look around you: big or small, they're all doing it; it's only the stupid who don't!" And Balidatta would provide examples. "Look at the ant, carrying grain to its nest. Does it ask who the grain belongs to? Then why should we? And the Company: what is it but a machine for plunder? Mr Edwards collects three million rupees; Mr Radha Raman gathers two millions at one go; Mr Vaidyanath Menon gets sixty thousand from the contractors for his daughter's wedding. Heaps of examples! They are competent men. And the others? As if they can get to heaven in their torn rags! This is today's world, my dear; it's no joke. One must either do or die!"



He winked as he spoke. It looked strange on him. His face was growing round, his body sleek with prosperity.

And he had another example. "Somewhere, in one of the Company's offices, there was a steel chest. The intelligent Bara Babu wanted it for himself. The next year, the 'steel chest' was entered in the ledgers as 'chest'. In five years' time, the books showed the 'chest' had been eaten away by white ants. Only to be expected! Old chests are generally eaten away by white ants, aren't they? Now that's what I call competence!"

But Sarojini was not able to look as far ahead as Balidatta. Sometimes her mind was filled with disgust and she looked fiercely at Balidatta. She was a woman: she had acquired money, clothes, ornaments ...

But was that everything?

Saddened, she would gaze into the distance.

The birds were flying away, back to their nests.

The leaves were shrivelling, falling.

The river was drying up.

And she? A mere joke, a jest. That dressed up in costly saris, wore expensive jewellery, tied up its hair carefully. And stared.

Only stared.

Sometimes, as if in a dream, she heard the sudden splash of dancing, twinkling waves. A moist wind, floating in from the distance, fanned the dying embers.

Startled, she looked up. As though she had been waiting.

There was no end to her waiting.



She had been standing on her verandah, gazing out absentmindedly, relaxed and carefree, when, blowing smoke rings through pouting lips, tennis racket in hand, appeared a princely gentleman, with her lord and master trailing. They were walking towards her house. She retreated indoors, confused.

Negligence was not in Sarojini's nature; she could be as guarded as a grain silo, but now she was taken unawares. She had been staring into the sunset, as was her habit. The sudden appearance of the two advancing gentleman raised an unknown ripple in the depths of her mind, leaving her bare, exposed. For shame ! The conscious mind raised a stern hand to admonish: she was the wife of the esteemed Balidatta Das, mistress of his household, respected. What would people think? But while the conscious mind grumbled and muttered, the unconscious mind swayed to the incoming tide, with that careless abandon that makes woman supreme in creation, makes the creeper the

queen of the forest; that has made man, since the beginning of time, a child of nature, forgetful of right and wrong. Her face turned crimson; her hair tumbled loose, and beads of sweat glistened on her forehead. Afloat on the sunset, she hid behind the window, gazing into the distance, her nostrils dilated—a wild animal taking cover, alert to the stranger's footsteps.

"This is my poor hut, Ranjit Babu," Balidatta said. "You know, I am not like you: an aristocrat's son, son-in-law of a millionaire, a man of distinction yourself. How fortunate I am that you've chosen to visit us!"

"That's right, Balidatta Babu" Ranjit Babu said, "call me names! I deserve it! I should've come much earlier. I'm really sorry. But then, you never asked me before. Perhaps you were afraid you'd have to feed me!"

"Quite right!" Balidatta retorted. "Could I have offered you the stuff we eat? I don't even have a proper chair for you."

Ranjit Babu laughed. "Don't be absurd! You have a lovely home. There's such a lot of space here, in front of this window. It would be ideal for a rose bed. And you could have season flowers here, around the edges. Beautiful!"



Had he looked up at the window? It had seemed so, but he was facing the door. Balidatta said "Roses? I'd been thinking of growing some kitchen vegetables here."

She nearly broke into a giggle but checked herself. He was laughing. Beautiful, even teeth.

"What practical insights you have, Balidatta Babu! It would never have struck me. But each spot carries its own associations; they just seem to rise out of the soil. As I stand here looking at your house I can only think of roses."

Oh men, men! Sarojini thought. What hunters they are! What meaning one can put into words! Like the stuffing inside the bland skin of a rice cake.

Poor Sarojini! She little realised that the hunt is man's first occupation.

Balidatta spoke, like carpenter's tools intruding into music: "Ranjit Babu, you have generations of culture behind you and so for you everything is roses. But people like me have to think of survival. A bunch of greens costs two annas; a single brinjal is one anna. That's why I thought of a kitchen garden."

"Good arithmetic!" Ranjit Babu laughed. "Grow your brinjals. But don't forget, milk is expensive too. And you'll need manure for the vegetables. So why don't you turn this lawn into a cattle-pen? Keep a pair of cows. You can dig a pit for the dung and urine. It'll be just right for the brinjals. Of course, it'll stink a bit, but what's a prosperous household without a stench?"

He pulled his cigarette case out of his pocket, lit a cigarette and extended it to Balidatta.

"Expensive cigarettes!" Balidatta said, examining the brand name." If I smoked these, my salary would burn up in a couple of days!"

"You are wise," Ranjit Babu said. "This *is* a bad habit."

"Then why smoke? They say it gives you a smoker's cough, makes your head reel."

"Nothing of the sort! I've been smoking since I was fifteen. It helps me think."

"But people say . . ."

"They're jealous! People say lots of things, Balidatta Babu, but with experience you can tell what's true and what isn't. Now look, you're going to become a senior executive soon; you'll find how jealous people are of your good fortune. All the bombast you hear about ethics and morals: nothing but collective jealousy!"



"Do you think I'm going to be promoted sooner than you?"

"Oh, forget about me!" Ranjit Babu said." I'm least interested in promotion. All I want is to enjoy life, to have a good time."

"How can you say that, Ranjit Babu? Who's going to captain this ship if you don't?"

"Ho! ho!" Ranjit Babu roared with laughter. "Many thanks! Really, it's a pleasure talking to you. Such brains!"

"Oh, look! I've kept you standing here!" Balidatta said, suddenly remembering his duties as host. "So much for my brains! You've been playing tennis, you're sweating all over. Harsha, come and fan us! I'll get my wife to send some tea. By the way, do you like your paan with tobacco? Or plain?"

"Don't trouble yourself, Balidatta Babu. You're not entertaining a bridegroom! I don't take paan anyway. Harsha, you needn't fan us. Go!"

"Very well, Harsha, you may go," Balidatta said. "Please give me a minute, Ranjit Babu."

Behind the window, Sarojini had been listening. Listening, and thinking. Do such people exist? Overflowing with laughter!

She could hear the tune he was humming.

Once again, the waves ruffled her mind. The tune within echoed outside.

Out of the dusk the memories came swarming. There had been no such people in the home where she had grown up. It had been a walled life. Occasionally, she would stand on tiptoe to peep beyond: that was the limit of her audacity. Then followed marriage and domesticity; webs and meshes, frogs and mice. The bells on her anklets announced every step she walked, setting out the boundaries of her existence. Still, the thought had come to her: somewhere, in the world outside, there must be people who lived, beautiful people. But never before had her mind been assailed so strongly. It was pleasant to think, though the thoughts made her numb. She was like clay; if only someone would come and mould her, sculpt her, carry her away, not along the trodden paths but into unknown wildernesses. If only ...



"Saroj, what are you doing here by the window?" Balidatta whispered to her. "Come, get us some tea and snacks. Do you know who is here? Someone very important! We have to hook him!"

"What?"

"We must catch this big fish! He's very influential; all our bosses like him. Comes of a rich family. And today he's come here just to meet us. It's a wonderful opportunity! We must entertain him well."

"He must be a glutton, your friend," she said, smiling, as she walked into her kitchen.

Later, over tea, Ranjit Babu said "Balidatta Babu, I'm sure Mrs Das is lonely here, all by herself. Perhaps the two of you can visit us. You'll find our home is like a ladies' club! You know, it's the company of other human beings that makes life bearable. As for our jobs, that's just an occupation. Everyone has a job, but that doesn't make them civilized, does it? Life should be fun! One must be sociable."

Baldatta felt his collar tightening around his neck. "Do you know what our problem is, Ranjit Babu? " he said. "We, I mean our ladies, are not particularly forward."

He had added the word "particularly" to gather a little self-respect, but Ranjit Babu turned the tables on him. "I don't want our ladies to be 'forward'. The word has acquired an ugly meaning. It goes against our traditions."

"Hear! hear!" Balidatta said. "I thought I alone was old-fashioned."

"Not old-fashioned, traditional. It's tradition that keeps a race alive."

Balidatta looked at him in surprise.

"Tradition is the essence of culture," Ranjit Babu continued. "Even in something as trivial as tennis."

"Trivial? But you're the club champion!"

"Only beccause there are no good players. But even in tennis, tradition is important. Flashy strokes may bring applause, but it's solid technique that wins matches."

"Wonderful!" Balidatta exclaimed

"Not at all. But being traditional doesn't mean we have to keep ourselves locked up in our old beliefs, old habits. And that's where we Oriyas lag behind. Our ladies, in particular, need exposure."



"You are absolutely right!" Balidatta said.

"Do come over!" Ranjit Babu said, rising. "And don't forget to bring Mrs Das along."

The very next day.

Balidatta Das, dutiful Company executive, was gulping down his early lunch before setting off to the office and delivering his customary lecture to Sarojini.

"Saroj, it's most important for you to change now. You know, we have risen to a new social class, and if we are to walk in step with the others you must make an effort as well; my efforts alone are not enough. You don't have to do much. Just learn a little English, a few modern ways, and we'll be able to merge with the others. Or else people will laugh at us!"

He spoke with great solemnity. This had become routine: Sarojini would argue; he would lecture excitedly, then suddenly

look at his watch, decide to postpone the lecture and rush off breathlessly to the office. A daily occurrence.

But today Sarojini did not contradict him.

Not that she hadn't changed. In the house opposite lived the Company veterinarian and his wife. They were Christians. Sarojini had made friends with the wife, who was teaching her to knit. She had started knitting a woollen toy—a little dog. It was almost complete; only the head remained. She was going to knit her own name proudly into dog's collar: Sarojini.

This was her secret manuscript, her masterpiece. She was going to surprise Balidatta.

She could feel herself growing new wings. Yes, she would have to change, adjust to the new society.

"Why don't you get me an English primer?" she said.

"English? Oh, ma!" he mimicked. "Is that you talking, Saroj? You know the story, don't you? There was this woman who had picked up a few words of English. To impress her neighbours, she would shout to her husband, each morning: 'Bearer, my shoes!' You won't do that to me, will you, Saroj?"



"Please don't make fun of me, and get me the English primer."

"Very well."

"And start my lessons tomorrow!"

"Really ? You're serious then? Very well, I'll get you the book today. By the way, didn't you say we should start calling on our neighbours?"

"Let's go to Ranjit Babu's house first."

"Today is Saturday. Shall we go tonight?"

"Only if you remember to come home early from the office."

"I will," he promised.

## Twenty-seven

She was going visiting. The thought stood between her and the woollen dog, which refused to grow beyond the neck. She looked at

the animal again and again but nothing in her experience confirmed it was a dog. Who had ever seen such a dog? Well, since it was of foreign origin, she would have to call it "dog." Or else "lamb" would have been more appropriate. But she could call it anything: what difference did it make? The world would go on.

The afternoon retreated; the shadows lengthened. She was getting ready. She prepared a large quantity of paan, as though she was going on a long journey. She lingered over her toilet, a young girl once again. When Balidatta returned she was quivering like a young snake which had just shed its skin. Tired though he was, he watched her, fascinated. She seemed to have returned to her earlier persona.

She had changed. Like a half-opened lotus on its stalk, trembling with laughter, teasing its own reflection rippling in the water. And he? The lotus-gatherer, in his leaking punt. Each time he reached out, the lotus slipped away, just beyond his reach, and smiled, nodding.

Memories awoke. He had been newly married then.

The dingy, damp little thatched hut; the tiny courtyard, turned into a stinking, mosquito-infested puddle from the washing of utensils and the left-over food. Here he had spent the first few months after his marriage. The magic spell was repeatedly broken but survived. But even in those days, there had been something different about Sarojini.



Precisely what it was he could neither fathom nor express, but she *was* different.

The joy in her had prevailed over the poverty. Cheerfully, she had woven the web of illusion over both of them. Seen but never grasped; inciting his manhood, making him glow with her laughter, with the yearning to conquer. A bondage that tasted of freedom; victory that had been fragrant with the joy of self-assurance. That had been Sarojini in those days.

And Balidatta had felt complete, fulfilled.

His dreams of greatness had been forgotten. No plans, no calculations cluttered his mind.

Only Sarojini and he.

His job had been a mere occupation, not his whole life.

He could have sacrificed everything to make her happy.

He had once opposed the idea of marriage, pleading poverty. His old father had said: "How can I make you understand, stupid? Marriage doesn't need wealth. Two mouths are as easy to feed as one. What is important is building a home. The man wants a woman, the woman wants a man. What else matters? If your hearts are in tune, you can share the same mouthful of rice; the same piece of cloth can cover you both. So why do you youngsters keep on saying you are poor? Where would *you* be if everyone felt the same way? No one would marry; no one would start a home! After all, most people have nothing; how many have anything?"

And in those blissful days he had often remembered his father's words. There had been no regrets.

What magic was it that had brought the past to life now?

It was the old Sarojini that he saw, as they walked towards Ranjit Babu's house.

To the new Balidatta, however, the memories were bitter. Yes, he *had* been able to lift himself out of the slush. But how different life could have been, if only he had been wealthy then.

What was so wonderful about love in a hut?



The best part of his life had been scorched by want.

But there was still time. He would get what he wanted. He would be strong as a bull, cunning as a jackal.

This was his *Mahabharat*[1], his war of dharma. The bread war.

Sarojini walked ahead. The years had rolled away and she was a young girl once again, free, uncaring, expectant.

What awaited her at the next bend in the road?

## TWENTY-EIGHT

His story . . . is man's.

Not just the story of his physical biological existence, his heredity of ancestral traits. It has neither

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[1] literally, the "great war of India." This is the title of the Hindu epic, written in pre-historic times, describing a fratricidal war between the members of a dynasty whose capital was near modern Delhi. "Mahabharat" also symbolises a holy war fought for a righteous cause. Here, the protagonist Balidatta imagines his struggle for promotion in the office to be a similar war.

the glamour of cinema nor the substance of verse. A feeble, malnourished tale. Nothing to be proud of.

It is not merely a story of his secret interior depths either. The darkness is inhabited by ghosts and hobgoblins; the entrances that admit light are guarded by numberless armed sentinels. Only a few moments of privacy occur, and during these the sentries stray away. Or lie in drugged sleep. But for how long? For what fraction of a lifetime? The rest is shackled. The free mind is crippled by fear: fear of loss, fear of society, poverty, death, disappointment. Fear is everything.

This is not a story of possibilities, of what *might* have been.

Not one of fulfillment and growth, for he has no growth. He is insignificant. A mere ant, one among the swarm. That's all.

Neither is it an account of worldly successes and failures. Of sequences of events, conflicts, struggles. Balance-sheets of aspiration and achievement.

There *are* no events. Today's happenings are tomorrow's dim tales, narrated by grandmothers. The graph dips or rises only slightly, if at all.



Nor is this a story of man's relationship with nature.

Nature—it is everywhere: the huge sky overhead, studded with millions of galaxies; different colours, different images, different emotions. And below: mountains, plains, valleys; countless sights. Nature: trees, creepers, cattle, birds; everything from the beasts of the forest down to the single-celled algae. Somewhere among these he is lost, the insignificant Balidatta; lost, and unresponsive to the world outside. The poor fish living in the water cannot see it from a distance. He has no opportunity to comprehend; he can only wallow, like a pig. The moon rises in the sky, the stars burst into blossom, but he has no eyes for them. Once, as an infant, he had seen the sky. He had looked up and seen, as he lay on his swaddling clothes, the moon playing hide-and-seek with the clouds. But not any more. If the sky were to be replaced suddenly with a canopy of sack-cloth, he wouldn't notice the difference, if it caused no hindrance. Trees he has seen in abundance, just as he has crushed innumerable blades of grass underneath his feet. He has never thought about them; the experience was never palpable.

Neither is this a story of human existence afloat on the ocean of endless time. Where all gross realities dissolve; there is neither beginning nor middle nor end. Nothing but sensation. Each pulse contains an entire history. Each bead isolated from the next, yet interconnected by time's invisible string. You count the beads as you chant your prayers: from left to right, or right to left—it doesn't matter. Whichever way you count, your chant pronounces the great mantra, the incantation of life. No, time is not the theme: poor Balidatta, all that he knows of time is the two hands of the clock ticking across its round face. In fact, he knows only the hours between ten and five: the office hours.

This is a mixture of everything. These six directions of the human situation are the six dimensions of the story. From their interaction arise hundreds of different scenarios. The invisible jeweller sculpts myriad facets for the single gem. The insignificant Balidatta Das sparkles like the Kohinoor diamond, scattering light.

This is his story—wordless and eloquent.

He walks on. As he has always done. Since the days of the first ancestor, now lost in the mists of time, life has quickened to the beat of various rhythms. The mind, aroused, has forged its own gods, its own ideals. Perhaps the gods of today are created in the image of The Daily Bread; he has worshipped them but hasn't given them a name.



And still he walks on.

## TWENTY-NINE

A vast compound. Parked by the roadside, near the gate, were three motorcars and two horse carriages.

The road was asleep. Only the occasional pedestrian, the scraping of shoes, growing faint, and then silence.

The large garden, now in darkness. Fingers of white light, escaping through the closed doors, heightened by the darkness. At intervals, bursts of concerted laughter.

"This is Ranjit Babu's house," Balidatta said.

"This?"

All that she felt was compressed into that one word. The large gate, large garden, large building—everything adding up to a large house—were like weights pressing down on her chest. Do people live such expansive lives?

A long breath of envy. Then the mind grew spiteful.

"Oh ma! Such a big house and they can't even provide a light for the gate? Walk carefully, you may trip."

The long, dark garden path. The moist scent of fresh flowers wafted across the darkness, raising disturbing echoes. Masses of fragrant bushes.

Whose cars and carriages are those? Balidatta was thinking. Who are the other visitors? Important people?

"Beautiful garden!" Sarojini said.

"Wait, let me call someone," Balidatta said. "Is anyone there? Is Ranjit Babu in ? Who's that, is it Bhima?"

Bhima was Ranjit Babu's chaprasi.

"Tell Ranjit Babu ... "

They did not have to wait long. Click! The light in the doorway was switched on and there stood Ranjit Babu, smiling, hands extended in welcome.



The garden sprang into life at the sudden, dazzling illumination.

"Hello, Balidatta Babu! Namashkar! Please come in! Ah, what good fortune! Do come in!" He wheeled around, beckoning, guiding them in. Brisk, athletic movements; each step like a pose. Beautiful postures of a beautiful human being.

"I say, Ma, Mili, Nili, Bindu—where are you all?"

"All" indicated multitudes. The catalogue was too long to be read through at once.

The hum of many voices, drawing near.

Poor Balidatta, looking this way and that. Sarojini's feet were hesitant. The reception committee arrived.

"My colleague, Mr Balidatta Das. Newly arrived on transfer. And Mrs Das."

"Namashkar! Namashkar!"

"So you are Mr. Das? I've heard your name so often it's like knowing you already! Welcome!"

"Balidatta Babu, my sister Mili. Be careful; you've been warned!"

"Oh, Dada, stop teasing!"

"And this is the other one, Nili. Not sisters these, they are my creditors. It's no joke having two unmarried sisters on one's hands!"

"Dada!"

"You are lucky, Ranjit Babu," Balidatta said.

"And this is Bindu. My better half."

Ha, ha, ha!

"Bindu is blushing! Dada's introductions are enough to make anyone blush," Mili said, poking Ranjit Babu playfully in the chin.

Bindu, with her arm around Sarojini, was leading her in. Mili and Nili escorted Balidatta, one on either side, towering over him.

The procession advanced.

But Balidatta was no longer conscious. His senses reeled. A strong perfume invaded his nostrils, inflaming, igniting him, causing his personality to melt, to bubble. Dazed, he was only dimly aware of the presence of Mili, Nili and Bindu. Together they formed the fabric of a magical new world.



The fragrance. The blood-red lips; the faces glowing with the first flush of dawn. Mili's bare upper arm; the flimsy, dream-like texture of her dress, the hint of firmness. A green fairy. Nili, dressed almost identically, but a pink fairy. Bindu in her blood-red sari, a red mist around a beautiful body.

Their garments did not merely cover up, did not conceal; they accentuated, embellished. Fluid movements. Waves of beauty, in which the senses drifted away.

How beautiful woman was!

The first splash into this enchanted world and all he could feel was contempt for himself. Chhi! How repulsive his own life was! Where was his civilization? Where was the beauty? Graceful movement, loveliness of form, beautiful surroundings, beautiful thoughts. And he? How low! How different his world was from this! He lacked education, culture, grace. He had never had such thoughts before. He had his work, his office; there, his feet were firmly planted. But here his feet

could not grip; they were reluctant. His mind refused to function, though the wheels were turning. He was tired, defeated. Harsha! Yes, he would go home and order Harsha to give him a good rub-down. Gradually, he adjusted himself to the surroundings.

Now, with a mind more conscious, he observed three others seated around a table. An elderly lady got up to greet him.

"My mother," Ranjit Babu said. "Mr and Mrs Das."

"Namashkar!"

"Now let me introduce you to the others," Ranjit Babu said. "This is Mr Saklatwala, famous contractor. You will hear his name mentioned repeatedly at Company meetings. Mr Tripathy, eminent political worker and leader. Mr Bratachari, the Assistant General Manager of our Company. I don't believe you've met him yet; he is mostly out on tour. And this is Mr Balidatta Das."

Introductions!

He remembered Bannu's house. There too, introductions — only introductions.

Shontu da had told him: introductions were only chance, momentary encounters. Nobody really knew anybody.



Mr Saklatwala turned around to face Sarojini. Mr Bratachari sat solemn and reserved, eyes contemplating the floor; occasionally he looked up to assess the situation. Mr Tripathi, smiling generously, radiating munificence, began to lecture Balidatta, though his eyes glinted like darts.

Wilting under the barrage of introductions and greetings, Sarojini sat with her head lowered, face partly veiled by the end of her sari. Bindu was trying to make conversation. Sarojini gave an occasional, hesitant reply. Balidatta was exhaling deep breaths, barely aware of what he was saying. But he did realise, he was making an ass of himself. His words were running away, contradicting his own thoughts. He could sense the others laughing at him; he was laughing at himself.

## Thirty

That had been the beginning, Sarojini thought, that night of madness.

The memory of that night made her tingle with disbelief. She had been blessed with so much, and yet ...

You cannot truly know yourself until somebody else tells you what you are. How sweet your praise sounds on other lips! All other discourses can tire you if they are stretched, but not an enumeration of your virtues.

Sarojini had lacked faith in herself, and so her discovery of her own talents, intelligence, good taste, opinions, self-confidence, and wisdom, came as a revelation.

Take, for example, the simple matter of taste. She had never known how good she looked with her hair combed into a bun and tucked to one side, over the ear. Or how a sleeveless blouse revealed the shapeliness of her arms. Now her fingers looked like claws unless she trimmed and polished her nails.



As for opinions, she had them in plenty. She freely distributed advice to newcomers, on a variety of topics, minor and major, from theory to practice. For instance, the simple difference between being civilised and barbaric. What could be more transparent, when there were proven criteria to distinguish one from the other? Shoes, for example. If you didn't wear them you would damage your feet. Could there be two opinions about this? If you weren't happy yourself you couldn't give happiness to others. Those who lived lives of denial were only cheating themselves. She believed too that each human being was master of his own destiny; each one got what he deserved, the fruit of his efforts and ability. Balidatta had reached a certain state because he deserved it; the labourer who earned two annas a day deserved no more. Distinctions *had* to exist; they were proper; they were a part of natural law. By her scale of values, sympathy for those who suffered was a waste of time, since achievement or failure were direct consequences of effort or the lack of it. Far better to invest your time on your own advancement.

These opinions were her newly acquired wealth—part of the new wisdom she had garnered. She had developed tremendous reverence for the printed word. First, the newspapers, because they told you about everything that was happening in the world. Now, if someone had argued that one needed to know a lot in order to follow the news, Sarojini would have retorted (exactly as she had seen Mili doing): "I am afraid I can't agree!" Wall Street had crashed! How terrible! Wall Street sounded fairly exotic anyway, when pronounced in Oriya. And so, if the newspaper said Wall Street was crashing, it must be something that could come tumbling down on people's heads. Teacup in hand, one leg resting on the other, she could say: " Have you heard about Wall Street? Today's newspaper says it's breaking up! What a calamity! The paper says it's going to hurt a lot of people. And how could it not hurt them? Wall Street! No joke! What terrible times we live in! Every morning you read about disasters, accidents, people dying. What a misfortune for the human race!"

Print provided fodder for talk. Meanings might be difficult to understand but talking about them was easy. Sarojini was sure of herself. She knew, it was the age of slogans; people loved to march together, chanting slogans in unison. It was great fun to shout the same slogan repeatedly in chorus; but when you stopped to think about it, the enjoyment vanished. And so, understanding was unnecessary. Shouting was all. Screeching loudly, hurling your opinions at others—that was the sign of a developed personality. Who would bother to ask what a slogan meant? Only someone who had nothing to do, someone who had no slogan of his own, someone who belonged to no party, someone worthless. Besides, one could ask you questions at will; you were not obliged to answer. That was true freedom! And so Sarojini was free to fling her new wisdom at others, with no obligation to explain anything.

Why bother about meanings anyway? The search for meaning was at the root of all misery! In the modern world each utterance could be given ten different meanings. If you were unable to find a new meaning you obviously had nothing to say! If your words were easy to understand they were worthless; wisdom was what defied understanding. And so Sarojini

could confidently run through an evening and several cups of tea, discussing mysterious things she had read about and only half understood.

Besides, she had learnt to ask questions. She had found men clamouring and fighting to answer her questions. The simplest of questions, such as: " What are your views about the current food problems?" or, "What do you think of modern literature?" "What will the future of cinema be fifty years from now?" It was so easy to ask questions.

And then the answers. With patience, one could learn much from them.

In a small crowd one could casually ask a question and start an altercation. How amusing it was to step aside and listen! You realised then how evenly matched people were in their ignorance and their anxiety to screech their own slogans.

But there were things she had learnt from experience that she never discussed. She was grateful for whatever life offered; she gathered it up and then wiped it away from her memory. Life had taught her: you were a sinner only if you carried the stamp of sin on your face; a thief only if you admitted your theft; a loser only if you mourned your losses. If you could wipe your face clean and smile innocently, never brood, never look back, life would be sweet.



The most hideous of tendencies lay hidden behind the most attractive appearances.

And Sarojini, childless, free of encumbrances, could observe at will and learn.

But when had she grown up? She was surprised at herself. If anyone had suggested that it was the small dose of education that had transformed her, she would not have believed it; she would have felt annoyed. Neither would she accept that there was no change in her — that it was merely her circumstances that had altered. Any suggestion that she was being false to herself and aping others would have infuriated her. And yet, it was all so strange, so surprising. She felt she was the same person, but had entered a new world. Totally unfamiliar.

The embankment had crumbled; the tide was rushing in.

That first night in Ranjit Babu's house. Other occasions had followed. She had picked up courage: she had dared to join the

groups, to talk to others, to look strangers in the face. Courage, she found, was everything: if you dared, life had taste. Or else you were left behind to envy and curse.

She had lost her rustic ways. Balidatta had wanted her to change and she had changed. It was he who hadn't kept pace.

"Saroj, do you *have* to go today?" That was all he would say.

But the moment she said "As you wish!" drooping, he would exclaim "No, no, you must go. They must be waiting!" He tried to feel proud, to be confident. "This is *my* doing!" he told himself, "*I* have moulded her." His wife had become a paragon of good taste. Was it only her lipstick and her nail polish, her perfume and her high-heeled shoes? No, it was her mind that reflected the change, the modernity. He was proud of her.

There were invitations in abundance for Mr Balidatta Das and Mrs Das. Her praises were sung in every gathering.

He was marching ahead.

One success after another; promotion after promotion. The battle for the daily bread had turned into a saga of conquest.

But why can't it be faster, he thought. His plans for success were unceasing; the hunger was limitless.



He was scornful of others. "You know, Saroj," he said one evening, beginning his usual lecture, "merit doesn't count at all these days. Just look at our Assistant Manager, Mr Jena. A complete dud! But he's been going up and up. Do you know the reason? Come closer, I'll whisper it in your ear. He has a daughter. Very pretty. Dances well. There was a Director of the Company, a Mr Karkare from Bombay. Elderly gentleman with false teeth. Fond of dance and music. We had a reception in his honour. The pretty daughter danced. And do you know who accompanied her on the tabla? None other than Mr Jena! The man who never smiles, the growler! He played the tabla in his old age. And his daughter danced. Then Mr Karkare went holidaying in Puri and Konarak. Who knows what happened next, but Mr Jena became Assistant Manager! The prize idiot! And here I am, slaving away over cartloads of files every evening! Well, what's the use of complaining?"

Sarojini smiled. That was enough.

Balidatta dreamt his dreams.

Evening.

Nitai looked this way and that.

Pressing down on his throat with the palms of both hands, making his voice sound hoarse and grave, he shouted loudly, "Harsha! Harsha!"

Like someone blowing through a bamboo tube.

Harsha appeared. Gripping him by the shoulder, Nitai led him to the outhouse, which was used by the servants.

They crouched silently in the darkness. Like two conspirators sharing a secret.

Harsha was about to speak when Nitai silenced him by placing a hand over his lips, listening intently for any sound.

He lit a match, then used it to light a filthy, battered old lantern which he pulled out of the darkness. Then, relaxing, he discarded his sweat-soaked tunic and turban.

"Please be seated, Harsha Babu," he said, grandly.

Harsha sat down.



Various objects lay scattered around the room in disorder. Little bundles tied up in cloth, the sum total of Nitai's daily quest for sustenance. Harsha was now untying one of these bundles; Nitai pounced like a tiger but the wrapping had been undone. A bunch of long, slender fruits from the sajana tree; four brinjals and three ripe plantains, half rotten. Harsha directed his attention to the plantains.

"I've found you such a good job that your stomach is about to burst from over-eating" Nitai said. "And still you snatch my food away, you greedy boy?"

Laughing, Harsha gulped the plantains down while Nitai grumbled. Nitai lit up his chillum[1], drawing in a lungful of acrid smoke. Harsha ate the last plantain, wiped his hands on Nitai's dirty tunic and reached out for the chillum.

"No, no" Nitai said. "How many times have I told you: this is too strong for you. Can a frog digest ghee? Have a biri if you like — there are some in that tin."

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[1] a handy smoking apparatus, made of baked earth.

Harsha found a biri and lit up. The two friends sat facing each other.

"What's the news, then?" Nitai asked.

"The babu is becoming as round as a ball," Harsha said.

"Not babu, you idiot; call him sahib. Sahib, you understand? Now is the time, you can get what you want for yourself. Don't miss the chance, it won't come again."

"What can I do? He never gives me anything. Only works my skin off."

"Oh, your eyes are getting too big for you," Nitai said.

Harsha laughed. "No, really."

"I know," Nitai said, "I know everything. Don't speak: just do what you're told. All this is Nitai's handiwork; it's all my play. See how prosperous they've become? The babu is now a sahib; the ma is a mem. The pauper has become a millionaire. Do you understand, Harsha Babu? Ask of me whatever you want; your wish will be granted!"

"Get me a torchlight then."

"You want to become a real babu? And you haven't even sprouted a moustache! Very well, you shall get what you ask."



"What business are you doing now, Nitai bhai?"

"How does that concern you?" Nitai said. "A ginger-seller bargaining for a ship! The business is all arranged. When the sahib wants something, it's 'Nita!' Nita has to manage everything. And Nita has to help the memsahib with all her affairs as well. 'I want to lend money on interest; find me a borrower!' 'Help me sell this sugar!' 'Find customers for our vegetables!' 'Sell this, sell that; bring me more money!' What can a child like you understand of all this buying and selling? But one thing I can see: a pauper's belly is never full! Just like yours. The more you get, the more you want."

"Boy! Boy!" The memsahib was calling. "Chaprasi! Where are the lot of you?"

Nitai hurriedly put on the tunic which he had cast aside, wrapping the turban around his head. The two came out of the servants' quarters. Making the door fast, Nitai pushed Harsha away in the opposite direction. "Go the other way, you idiot! If the babu sees us together he'll raise his fist at me."

## THIRTY-ONE

Dhuk! Dhuk!

His heart throbbed like one of the engines in the Company's factories.

The office clock showed two in the afternoon. Raising his head above the stack of files, he shouted: "Nitai, tea!"

Nitai, who had been noisily opening the various containers of his tiffin-carrier, brought tea in a tall, red flask. Lighting a cigarette, Balidatta stared emptily into the distance. A single thought kept runnning in his mind, like the stutter of a damaged gramophone record: "Sarojini? Will she be at home?"

The cigarette was burning. Yes, he had acquired the habit of smoking cigarettes. He needed hot water and hot smoke to keep the engine running, to cope with the cartloads of files. Besides, he was no longer poor.



He had no sympathy for the poor either. As though avenging himself on poverty, he had grown deliberately extravagant in his habits, though his tastes were often questionable. His suits were of expensive material even if they did not always go well with his complexion. His home was lavishly decorated, though the sitting room reminded you suddenly of a barber's saloon. Sarojini was able to improve matters somewhat, but such things did not concern Balidatta.

His eyes rested on the liveried, turbaned Nitai, his personal chaprasi, arranging his lunch and tea on the dining table. In those calm, deliberate movements was embodied the whole of Balidatta's aspiration. The bright tunic, the gleaming brass badge, the enormous turban. The sight was soothing to his eyes.

That was one side of things. And the other? "Will Sarojini be at home?"

Deep breaths. The cigarette smouldered.

Swarms of questions, blended with experience, jostled beneath that silent absent-minded reverie. What does a man want?

What is happiness? What is life? What if one were to bang one's fist down on the table and ask: "Why?" Would there be an answer to that Why? Innumerable questions. Some pondered them through deep sighs; others through yawns. Others stared blankly, quivering and jangling within, like a stone flung at telegraph wires strung across poles, though no question formed itself in words.

Balidatta directed his attention to his lunch and tea, not for any pleasure but for disposal. Files piled high gave his mind no rest until they had been disposed of; and so it was with all his actions. Get rid of the piles! But his thoughts lingered on one object: Sarojini. And as the thoughts gathered, the scales were unconsciously balanced against other questions. What is happiness? What makes life happy? What is freedom? How can a man be free?

Prosperous Marwari merchant or home-grown Oriya shop-keeper, toiling to make his business grow, like a termites' nest. The businessman became a slave to his business. And then, what labour, what torment! What ceaseless endeavour to keep the nightmare of bankruptcy away, to keep the flag of commerce flying, while the individual self was smothered. Bowing and bending to the powerful, dancing to their tune. No set time for meals, no time to attend to your family, to look after your children. Business, being busy—that was all. And when you lay down to rest, past midnight, the horror crouched beneath your pillow. Profit and loss. The ant-hill grew, fed on human flesh; the figures in the bank multiplied. Poor, pitiable capitalist!



The fat-salaried Company executive, living out his days among stacks of files or the hum of machinery. Paid, nominally, to work seven hours a day, but in reality a twenty-four-hour slave. Toiling for another from sunrise to midnight, worrying for another, driven by another's fears. No time to call your own. You could be in bed, enjoying your "rice sleep"[1], when the boss's chaprasi exercised his right to wake you up with written orders: " The coolies in a remote depot are reported to be fomenting a strike; proceed at once!" Your wife is ill,

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[1] deep sleep induced by a heavy meal of rice, in the earlier part of the night.

your children are turning wayward, the crops on your village lands are withering, but the slightest protest will bring a pink slip next morning: "See me." Then, a twenty-minute lecture. "Resign, if you are not able. There's no place in the Company for the unwilling." In addition, all kinds of coarse as well as refined behaviour to keep your superiors happy : dancing to their drumbeats, giggling to match their smiles. With the ghost of another constantly riding on your back, obeying his orders: "Sit down here, stand up, smile a little, weep, kill, preserve — ."

Whatever you adopt as your means turns into its own objective. You exist only to bear the grinding wheel on your chest. You try to fool yourself by focusing on the exquisite engraving on the wheel, exclaiming "This stone wheel is beautiful, living. Truly a chariot wheel! How delicate the carving is! What imagination! A gem, born out of the sweat of innumerable craftsmen. What a creation!"

Admiring the turning wheel doesn't stop experience from crushing your ribs under the weight of the cold stone. The means becomes the end, and yet that cold stone device, that infernal machine — what does it care for the frailty of man's flesh and blood? For the tender story of his tender mind? The wheel grinds on, consuming one lifetime after another.



It has no awareness, no conscience.

It grips by the throat, drives relentlessly.

Man loses his freedom.

And so, of all the smiles you see in the world, most belong to those who do not comprehend. The infant or the imbecile.

Who can smile knowingly?

Civilisation is civilisation.

Rubbish. The tiniest muscle underneath the skin contains corrosive venom. The consciousness is infected, the thoughts poisoned.

Hell, hell! Hell is here, in this world. Will Sarojini be at home?

Waves rippling through the consciousness. Its language is inarticulate, its images like shadows. Winking lights precede the waves. The salty tang makes you want to throw up.

He could see Nitai's face. A mask, not a face. Unaffected, unattached. Seemingly as solid as granite, for all the hollows and bumps. The leaden eyes, elevated at a certain angle, in a certain posture. The eyelashes were denuded, so the eyes seemed bare, lashless. Granite eyes. No, uranium eyes. Pristine uranium, dating back to earliest creation. Uranium that had turned to lead over the aeons. The eyebrows were lead. If the earth can be dated through the amount of lead it contains, what age could be ascribed to Nitai? The restless thoughts grew quiescent, the throbbing of the heart was stilled. This individual, this man of uranium, of lead, of clay: what histories, what spectacles had he not witnessed ? How many officers, how many episodes in the Company's chronicles? Generation after generation, the Company had existed, watched over by people like Nitai. They had borne abuse, suffered scorn, waited, endured. Nitai had told him of a former army officer who threw glass paper-weights at people in his anger. Then there had been a MacSomething, from the Scottish Highlands, who raised his fist at the slightest excuse. According to Nitai, he had been tamed by a chaprasi, bearded Rahiman Miyan, who had challenged him "Sahib, if you want to fight, come on!" The sahib had shaken his hand. Uranium men, men of lead, Nitai and Rahiman — timeless, abiding, like divinity. He had seen, he had suffered. Why was he surviving? What pleasure did he find in surviving? Why didn't he die? That same, unchanging existence, that same posture — watching, gazing ...



Hell, oh hell! His head seemed to be aflame suddenly.

Civilization!

The venom was spreading, making everyone restless. Hence the violence, the scuffles, the bloodshed. The wars, the bombs. Civilization.

The blood had risen to his eyes. The inside of his head was buzzing. Flinging his burning cigarette end at Nitai he roared "Nitai! Idiot! Stupid old man!"

"Huzoor?"

"What are you staring at, idiot? Why don't you remove these cups and plates?"

The words were scarcely out of his lips when Nitai, head lowered, had picked up the utensils. As though he was a

machine. The lead man had his own inscrutable motion. He arranged everything neatly. Unfolded and spread out the newspaper on the table. Took the lid off the red tin of cigarettes.

The five minutes after lunch was when the sahib, Balidatta Das, glanced through the headlines of the English newspaper.

Startling news. Air Commodore Keyserling, Chief of Air Staff, had eloped with the wife of General Woodson, Chief of the Armed Forces. General Woodson had been granted a divorce.

The aged General Woodson. Decorated for gallantry in many a campaign. He had risen to the top of his profession. But today he was alone, without a wife or family.

The tiny Balidatta Das heaved a sigh. He was proud of the fact that he understood the workings of sahib minds, empathised with their sorrows. Wasn't he a kind of sahib himself?

But suddenly he felt a red hot iron pierce his chest. The newspaper headline swam before his eyes.

His Sarojini. How he loved her! She belonged to him alone.

Fifteen past two in the office clock. Most probably, she was away, socializing. These days she was invited to many parties. She was like a child in her exuberance. She had come a long way, made a lot of progress. Life was blooming.



Well, let her go out and have a good time. She would come back.

## THIRTY-TWO

Half-past three. Almost.

Arms crossed beneath her neck, head pillowed on her hands, Sarojini lay on her back. Day-dreaming.

Waiting.

She felt the wind streaming in through the open door and window. Beside her lay a small notebook, leather-bound, edged in gold. This was where she recorded the important events of her awakening life: parties, invitations, committees, plans.

Who was it that had said: "Life must be made purposeful; time must be trapped in events and events recorded in diaries"?

Success does not come uninvited.

Sarojini stared vacantly, slowly rocking one of her legs to and fro on the mattress. The tide of consciousness within her head ebbed and flowed like a ticking clock.

Half-past three. Drawing nearer.

Her ears were alerted to the sounds around her.

What a medley of noises emerges from apparent soundlessness when one is attentive! A creak here, a squeak there, a banging in the distance. Must be Harsha. Always upto something. Very handy around the house. But no matter how much she tried, she couldn't help feeling irritated by his presence. Why? Was it only because of his untidiness? Sometimes he was positively filthy, and then she felt even more annoyed.

Harsha at work. The intermittent cawing of crows. Other birds. A hodge-podge of sounds in the distance, people and motorcars.

The wind moaning softly. Like the mingled breathing of two people in the background. Or sudden gushes of suppressed laughter.



Disturbing, if you allowed yourself to think about it. Sarojini raised her head and slid backwards onto the pillow. She glanced all around her. There was no one.

The sun grew mellow. She looked at the slim watch on her wrist. Three-thirty? Well, she was ready. Maybe, now ... Glancing through the window, she took in the row of houses stretching away.

"He." Her Lord and Master. Senior Company executive. Should be returning from work soon. But who is not working here? Does one have to stop living just because of work? Face dark with sweat when he arrives. In the evening: "Harsha, come and massage my legs."

"Ha, ha, ha—Harsha."

How smart and active Ranjit Babu was! And Narendra Yadav, lips curled elegantly around a cigar, stylish clothes, wide shoulders, as if created to carry grave responsibilities. And Mr Tripathy: short statured, but there was something magnetic about him. Was it the brisk movements, the chubby face,

the broad forehead or the mischievous look in the eyes? So many others, each different, but full of life. Some attracted you by their softness, others through their ruggedness, some by the look of helplessness which aroused instant sympathy. If you compared human beings to animals, it was clear: it was the strength within that made the human animal beautiful. Specially in a crowd, at parties; when, in the presence of the female, the animal instinct asserted itself in an unconscious trial of strength.

And among those beasts, a timid little creature, two insignificant horns on its head, a tiny tail. "He." Bleating.

"Maeyn, maeyn."

There, the goat. It's coming, sniffing the plants in the garden. Thank goodness the gates are closed. Frustrated, the goat lifts its head, arching its neck. Two little horns. Muddy eyes. Dark sweat streaming.

Oh, how weird! Sarojini's personality pushed one more curtain aside and emerged into the open. Three-forty by her wristwatch.



"He" would be about to return. Nitai would give him his tea and snacks. But really, he should take better care of himself, she reflected gravely. At mealtimes, it was now Sarojini who lectured. On life, on happiness, on rest and relaxation, on everything that was going on around them. They no longer chatted. The burden of the office weighed him down even when he was eating. After dinner, files — until midnight. What had he got out of life? But he just wouldn't listen. Well, each one to his disposition.

What now? Three forty-five already! She ran a quick check through her diary. Suddenly, the sound of a motorcar. The familiar horn. A trumpet, not a horn. In some movie that she had seen, the king and queen rode in a chariot, drawn by admiring subjects. Ahead of them, the blaring trumpets: Step aside! Give way!

Ranjit Babu's enormous, expensive motorcar came to a halt opposite the gate. Ranjit Babu and Mili dismounted. Impatient as a child, half-dressed, she darted out into the doorway for a brief moment, framed like a picture, breast heaving.

Then back she went, exactly as she had come.

They had planned a small outing. A huge, grassy meadow, far away, on a sloping hillside. Edged by clumps of trees. As she ran into the house, nostrils dilated, she could sniff the aroma of the moist grass. The glint of molten gold, pouring down from the slanting sun, was in her eyes. The quiet stillness of the empty meadow filled her being. Dimly, she saw the rows of trees; like swans they swam across the ocean of green, with Mili talking softly about one of life's many mysteries.

She would stop occasionally to pick up a little pebble, which she flung aimlessly into the distance.

Ranjit Babu would whisper "What are you thinking?"

And a little bird chirped in the distant trees.

## THIRTY-THREE

Let her go out and relax, poor Sarojini. Balidatta was proud of what he had achieved. He was a man of the world, capable and efficient — not a domesticated pet. He had grown, moulded his life as he wished. Now he could be an example to others.



And as for Sarojini, she was something to be proud of as well.

Of course, there were people everywhere waiting to shower you with praise if it suited their purpose. Only the other day, a contractor from Bombay, who had something to gain from the Assistant Manager, Mr Jena, called on him in his office. During the meeting he happened to mention the dancers who were performing in the Bombay films. Gradually, the conversation veered round to Mr Jena's daughter Shubhrangi, and her talent as a dancer. He was lavish in his praises, though there was no more than a thousand rupees at stake.

Balidatta frequently heard his wife's praises too. He listened, and gradually he felt that it was no more than the truth.

It was his responsibility to provide opportunties for her to grow. The singer could sing any tune if she had the right accompaniment.

Besides, did he even have time to think of other matters? He was always busy, working for the Company all day, and attending to his own interests when he found the time.

The intoxication of achieving! Conditions were right; he manipulated people at will. Bloated with self-importance, he wallowed in his own greatness when his underlings trembled or prayed to him for mercy, fearful of the power he wielded over their daily bread. He couldn't roar at anyone physically but he made up by using his pen like a razor; after all, he was a man of action. And each time he slaughtered someone, using tradition as an excuse, it gave him deep satisfaction — as though he was hacking away at his own tattered past, clearing a path to his glorious future.

Those who knew him feared him like the god Yama[1], and it pleased him, for he believed there could be no efficiency without fear. It was improper for an efficient person to look happy: cheerfuness and incompetence went hand in hand. And so he plotted and conspired, encouraged people to carry tales, and this took up much of his time. But he produced results, and his fame grew.



It was only Mr Shaw that he was afraid of still. Those waters were too deep and murky for him, too unpredictable. In the blink of an eye a new personality could manifest itself; he never knew how to cope. He had been snubbed while attempting to flatter and praised while licking his wounds; his laughter had been abruptly stifled when dark clouds suddenly appeared on the deity's face. He had tried repeatedly and been rebuffed each time — left parched and thirsty.

Only the gift of terror remained.

The thunder of that first encounter still rang in his ears. One never did get over one's first impressions of people; no matter how high you rose in life, your head would bow of its own accord when you met your primary school teacher!

And so, from "Sahib" to "Mr Shaw" — Balidatta had remained steadfast in his adoration. But the stone god was not to be moved by his prayers; neither tears nor litanies had any effect. His sheer immutability, his imperviousness, forced you

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[1] the fearsome Hindu god of death and righteousness

to gather up the shattered waves of your own emotions and look for answers within yourself.

The more you tried to appease the god the more frustrated you became.

Promotion had brought him into frequent contact with Mr Shaw, but the relationship did not change. He was still made to stand, eyes downcast. Balidatta would meditate on the god's lotus feet, like a true devotee, while the god chatted with a visitor. Then suddenly, he would raise his head and roar: "Why do you stand there dreaming? There's no place here for dreamers! Tell me, what have you done about this affair?"

And if Balidatta managed to speak out the words he had rehearsed to himself, Mr Shaw would silence him with another roar: "Listen to me first!"

The visitor would smile.

And Balidatta would swallow the humiliation and return to his work, his zeal undiminished.

He had once accompanied the Sahib on tour. Several factories were to be inspected; the Company's workers were everywhere. Balidatta had given instructions in advance: there were welcoming arches, reception committees, rows of coolie women with garlands. He had hoped that Mr Shaw would be pleased, would stop the car and receive their greetings. But the car had thundered on, its horn shrieking angrily, scattering the crowds. In a quivering voice, Balidatta ventured: "They wanted to show their respect, sir ..."



Mr Shaw spat noisily. An indistinct growl rose from his throat, then curses and obscenities. "Respect?" he roared. "Loafers! Which idiot had tutored them to stand here by the roadside instead of attending to their work? Who was responsible for the arrangements here?"

He looked with venomous eyes at the crowd of people, bowing like frail areca palms lashed by a storm. The car was making its way slowly through the throng. His face was contorted in an unnatural grimace, jaws clamped together, upper lip lifted off his teeth, whether in a smile or a scowl one could not tell. Perhaps both.

"Sir," Balidatta said falteringly, head bowed in humility, "they feel grateful to you for providing them with their

daily bread. Love comes to their hearts naturally, it can't be checked."

Mr Shaw turned on him with a snarl. "Heart! Heart!" he said, following up with an obscenity. "All lies! Nonsense! Nothing but an excuse for weakness! What an idiot you are . . ."

"Huzoor!" Balidatta murmured, chastened, sliding unconsciously from his elevated rank, back to the familiar form of address.

"Only fools talk of the heart," Mr Shaw said "And I don't want such officers in my office, remember that. We serve the Company; we are its tools. Our concern is with work, not hearts. Have you seen the boilers in the Company's factories? The cranes, the engines? That's what we are. If a machine broke down you'd blame its heart, wouldn't you? Remember, we are knives, to be used as the need arises. We can mow grass or slash throats! We are seasoned timber: neither sun nor rain has any effect on us. What's this talk of hearts?"

And Balidatta made a note of this valuable precept in his mental diary.



But Mr Shaw was not to be confined to any precept. A little later, the car came to a halt near the entrance to a Company depot which was due for inspection. Tall Mr Narsaiah Dora, who was in charge, came running, unwrapping the turban from his head and hastily wiping the dust off the car's body. And simultaneously, his subordinates piled baskets of oranges, bunches of plantains and pots full of freshly made cottage cheese into the back of the car. And without getting out of the car Mr Shaw inquired, "What news, Dora? Are things going well?"

"Huzoor!"

"Very well, bring me the log book."

Still seated in the car, Mr Shaw wrote out his inspection report. Everything was in order; Narsaiah Dora's ability was extraordinary. The car rolled on.

Later still, when it was almost dusk and they were driving through another Company township, Balidatta looked at the groups of coolies loitering on either side of the road and said, trying to read the Sahib's mind: "What useless fellows they are! Have they no work to do?"

And Mr Shaw, gazing absent-mindedly into the distance, said suddenly: "You have no brains, Das! You should know, it is these coolies who help to provide our daily bread!"

How concerned, how dejected his face looked in the fading light, as though all the sweat and anguish of that bunch of coolies was hoarded there! And in a grave tone, that precursor of the unborn revolt of the world's downtrodden announced: "You are stupid; you know nothing of the sorrows of others. All you care about is profit, and so all your views are selfish and ignorant. But who makes your existence possible? Whose labour has built up this huge Company? Do you know? Have you tried to find out? It's heartless officers like you that cause unrest. Can't you sense the dissatisfaction building up? One day it could turn everything upside down, blow everything apart. And where would you be then? Have you thought about it? These workers expect a little sympathy from you, a few kind words. If you are unwilling to offer these, you shouldn't call yourself an officer!"

After that Balidatta stopped trying: everything he said was sure to be contradicted. Perhaps the secret of success lay in contradicting and distorting everything your junior said.



He made mental note of everything, but he realised it was not in his nature to rebuke or scold someone to his face. He was awed by the presence of others: if he had contrary views, he would express them in writing, not in speech.

The rest of the journey with Mr Shaw was completed in sullen silence. How strange the man was! Different circumstances brought out different manifestations, yet it was the same person throughout! He would abuse you for not trying when you did your work sincerely; and when you did nothing he would pour out his sympathies. He could be a man-eating tiger, yet to Narsaiah Dora he was as gentle as a cow. The same person!

He grew confused: no, he could not figure out Mr Shaw. Every textbook of success was proved wrong here. He had only heard about these legendary characters who ruled the Company. People said: they are so trained, they can handle every situation, put on a hundred masks, act out a hundred roles!

They had no use for uprightness, for ethics. Neither had he, but something was lacking. At that level he couldn't cope: it was the Shaws who marched ahead.

Nevertheless, at his own level, he played the game with unwavering dedication. Planning, plotting, changing course, pushing ahead with determination. Blind as a termite, burrowing this way and that under the earth. That was his life.

## THIRTY-FOUR

Suddenly, one day, they heard Mr Shaw was to be transferred.

To the Company's employees, this was history. Outsiders wouldn't fathom its significance; it would mean nothing to the dwellers in cities, the peasants in their villages, the general populace. All that the outsider can see is the machine working away busily; look anywhere, in any corner of the world, and you will see the machinery clanking away still, somehow. The chimneys never stop belching smoke; the wheels continue to turn, making metallic music; the hands are never idle. Things go on as before; one leaves, another takes his place; the void is always filled up. No one is indispensable.



People are born, they create history and are lost in its pages. Individual existence melts away into the flow of time. Even people who become famous, those who cast long shadows for a few brief years, are expendable. The sun would rise every morning even if they had never been born; the world would still be green, full of surprises. People would remain what they are; life would continue to be a mixture of smiles and tears; society, a blend of beasts and angels. Children would continue to play in the dust; adults would still build houses and the aged go on chanting their beads.

Yes, that's just what Bannu might have said, Balidatta thought. Lounging in his easy-chair, looking through half-shut eyes at Shontu da's face, puffing carelessly at his biri, he would have said, tersely: "Transfer or no transfer, what's it to us?"

But then Bannu's thinking did not represent the average. All his shots either went over the goal-post or were deflected for a corner kick. The goal had eluded him.

Even in the thick of the battle for success Balidatta never forgot him. One day, he hoped, he would be able to take Bannu under his tutelage. The day couldn't be far off now. Mr Shaw's historic transfer had made the atmosphere electric, and as Balidatta swam cautiously through the treacherous currents he frequently remembered Bannu. Sometimes with compassion, but more often in exultation, when he thought how mistaken Bannu's views had been and how sound his own had proved.

What a stir the transfer created! When any two Company employees met, this was all they could talk about. The Sahib was going, but what upheavals would his pen bring about? Some would be extolled in his reports and elevated; others would be disgraced; the fortunes of groups as well as individuals would soar or sink. There was tumult everywhere. Someone had flung a stone into the beehive; everyone was buzzing.

It wasn't merely because Mr Shaw was leaving; someone else was to replace him. All kinds of speculations were being floated: his appearance, his character, habits, his attitudes were all subjected to scholarly research. The new would replace the old: it was cause for rejoicing. The slave-mind survives on hopes of change. It may be a naive hope in the long run, but people differ in their capacity to experience happiness.



Someone who has always lived a repressed life, dominated by another's will or the tyranny of rules, cannot risk a laugh until he has made sure that the coast is clear. He cannot sit relaxed; the lurking fear that he may be breaking a rule grips his heart. His hopes are centred on the few blades of withered, yellowing grass lying under the rock. Was the old rock better or the new? Can he tell? The mutiny bottled up within can express itself only in a yearning for change.

And so the new Sahib was awaited with eager anticipation.

Meanwhile, one had to treat the old Sahib with increased deference. He hadn't yet yielded up his pen; he could still bite, right upto the moment of departure. A few scribbles on paper and a life could be blighted.

Mr Shaw ruled with his usual authority—in fact, with redoubled authority. He inspired awe. How self-assured they

were, this tribe of executives! To the very last minute, until he signed his name and handed over charge, it was all "Mine, mine!" Not a trace of slackness, indifference. Men of steel — no, steel itself. Balidatta Das busily compared notes with others; they formed pairs to recite Mr Shaw's virtues. "Right. This is why the Company has flourished, generation after generation. Because of officers such as this. What does it matter where you are sent? There is responsibility everywhere. It is this sense of responsibility that separates the manager from the managed: not the amount of donkey work you perform."

Mr Shaw was going on transfer; a million things had to be attended to and many in the office girded up their loins to help. Old beds, tables and assorted junk had to be auctioned off; the things to be transported had to be packed properly; trucks had to be hired, coolies engaged. More importantly, one had to be visible, seen to be busy, helping. That last report could be vital. The departing god might relent and bless. Hopes lingered wordlessly; it would be foolhardy to speak up.

On the surface, things were as usual.



At last the day arrived. The new Sahib appeared. Tall, youthful, radiant Mr Sharma. European in manner and speech. Huge motorcar. There was a small ceremony on the lawns facing the office that evening. Farewell the old, welcome the new. Then, the traditional group photograph: squatting on the ground, standing on benches, peeping over shoulders to make sure you were included. The two garlanded Sahibs in the centre. "Ready, one, two, three. Click!" The memory locked away forever. The copies would be distributed, framed, hung up on walls. Cobwebs would be woven over them, termites would feed on them, insects burrow into them.

Some day, in the distant future, someone would try to recognise his own dim features in the group of fading faces. The past, rolled back, would yield up its treasure briefly.

Just that.

After the photograph, a farewell tea. With stations and ranks duly observed.

Short speeches, full of servility. Voices devoid of enthusiasm.

The end of a chapter, but without punctuation.

The shackles were firm. Taut, chilling.

## THIRTY-FIVE

The Shaw Era was followed by the Age of Sharma.

The first few days were devoted to adoration and thanksgiving, for hope is always closer to the human heart than anxiety.

It began with the Head Clerk, Basanta Babu. Opinions were manufactured at his desk, then disseminated to the rest of the office.

"What did I tell you?" Basanta Babu whispered to Nuru Babu. "The moon has its phases: first the dark, then the bright. That's Nature's law. Now the demon is gone. Tell me honestly, don't you find the earth growing lighter?"

"What a man he was! A demon in man's form. Each time he sent for me my blood turned to water. His words were like hammer blows, like thunderbolts. You never knew where the lightning was going to strike. Thank God he's gone!"



"Oh, the insults I've had to swallow!" Basanta Babu went on. "But what else could I do; when you're serving, you have to suffer. You've sold your head to another! But then, God is great! Not all our days are alike; the period of trial is over. And the new Sahib! He can enslave you with his courtesy! The days of abuse are past. One can breathe freely!"

"He was a beast!" Nuru Babu said. "The new Sahib is so kind . . ."

"They can't be compared," Basanta Babu said emphatically. "Breeding makes all the difference. This Sahib is of aristocratic stock. You can tell from his habits. For him, this job is only a hobby. He's rich, extremely rich. Reared in luxury."

"What you could find lodged betwen his teeth is more than the other fellow has eaten in all his life," Nuru Babu said vividly.

"You can tell an aristocrat from his face," Basanta Babu said. "What charm! What magic in his speech! One look from him is enough to buy you out! And he's exceptional in his ability

and education. How else do you think he reached this position at such an early age?"

No, there was no place for Mr Shaw in the new community. The rot had been removed but the stench remained. For a while, the stench would be talked about, and then it too would be forgotten.

Now it was all Sharma.

Hari Babu said to Shyam Babu: "Have you seen how intelligent our new Sahib is? That one was a donkey: it took him all day to go through a file and he still couldn't decide. The new Sahib can grasp things at a glance. Everyone in the office is talking! Send a file up to him and it's back to you, faster than lightning. That's what I call intelligence! Some people are so thick-headed you can explain to them all day and nothing will go in. And others: they've understood what you're going to say the moment you open your mouth!"

"Yes, he's exceptional," Shyam Babu said. "I was watching him play tennis at the Club yesterday. He defeated everyone effortlessly. What masterly strokes!"



And Balidatta told Sarojini "Saroj, you should see our new Sahib! He's very young, but so quick! And so polite, so courteous! There can't be many such people in the service. He knows his job and understands the feelings of others."

"Oh really?" Sarojini said, teasing. "Well, why don't you bring him home? What's the harm?"

"He's so unassuming he'll really come if I ask him. You think I'm exaggerating? He's truly such a person, very sociable. He'll stop people by the wayside to pat them on the back and ask about their welfare. People have begun to love him in these few days. It's a pleasure to work under him!"

"Good for you!" Sarojini said. "You've suffered so much in the past, it's time you had a break. Harsha, give your babu a good massage, will you?"

And as he lay stretched out on the bed, Balidatta Das saw the glowing future unfold.

It seemed like yesterday. How far he had come! The new Sahib's graciousness gave him fresh hope.

Idly, he combed through the fine print in the ledgers of his own mind. After all, what does the serving man want? Only

economic gain? Well, that surely, or else why would anyone serve? But there were other needs too; one doesn't sell one's manhood just for the pay. There was the challenge, the sense of achievement, the power. The satisfaction of proving yourself again and yet again, climbing up and up, while the others stared open-mouthed.

And then, the trust, the respect, the courtesy you received from those above you. The security, the freedom from anxiety.

You could turn your back on the world, stretch, close your eyes and forget the howling outside.

Harsha's fingers soothed the tiredness and aching away.

Fragments of the past floated up. Behind the achievement lay memories of pain. He had seen much, experienced a lot. The suffering of others lay intermingled, layer upon layer, between his own past and present. Their frustration, their hopelessness, their sorrow. When he closed his eyes it was their moaning that he heard. They had laboured, struggled, but got nothing in return. How many among them had bent their backs to the work, toiled lifelong, hoping dully, with no time or energy even to dream? The same straw mat at home, the same bamboo pole to hang your clothes on, the same coarse, lumpy rice. The everlasting want. Patched, scruffy clothes. The salary running out on the fifth day. No tomorrow. Like trying to rest in the shade of a palmyra tree.



There were others who dreamed dreams, but also got nothing.

Hundreds of examples. Somayya Patnaik had died of cholera. He had turned his home into a club for friends. Born host. When someone from the Company headquarters came on tour he attached himself to the visitor like a tick. Paan, tea, snacks, dinners. And when no one was around, the prayers, the petitions: "Please, Sir, what are my chances? What were they saying about me in the office? Am I likely to be promoted?" You could see him vividly. Tall, aging Somaayya Patnaik, bones rattling, gaunt cheeks — loose jacket and trousers from his younger days flapping like laundry from a pole. Young wife from a second marriage; shaped like a pumpkin, always bright and fresh. Many befriended Somayya Patnaik, offered him sympathy, kept his flickering hopes glowing, consumed his tea, chatted and

gossiped in his home. Some became foster-brothers to make hospitality easier. At Christmas he sent hampers to the Sahibs. Ever obliging, humble Somayya Patnaik. Cholera wrote "finis" to his battered existence, bringing him peace. Case disposed.

And his wife? Whatever happened to her? She had been one of his weapons in the battle for success. Many had savoured the delectable food she served. But how long could they keep the memory?

"Saroj! Saroj!" Balidatta called out.

"What is it?"

"No, nothing."

A display of skin and bones, in which hope lay entombed. Eyes like smouldering coals. Those coals would never ignite; the glow would die out. Hollow man, empty man. The empty vessel would never fill; the battered pot could not contain anything. Rows upon rows of pots and pans and vessels of all description, floating on the swollen current, sinking, rising, capsizing; swarms, crowds, floating away, floating past, reappearing.



Floating on the foul, stagnant water, loathsome, choking: the memory made you shiver, made the skin shrink. The procession of mangled, leprous bodies. Unending.

Venkat Rao, Bannu ... What had become of them? How were they managing? Buying their rice at one and a half seers to the rupee? How successful had they been?

It's evening now. Bannu must be puffing away at his biris, unconcerned, impervious to circumstances. A book by his side. The lamp burning dimly in his house, in the midst of darkness.

The lamp burning.

Pretending to be happy when he had nothing. Squatting under the banyan tree, with the ritual fire burning, ashes smeared all over his body, tiny loin cloth, pretending to be happy. Detached, like a sadhu. The idiot.

"Harsha! Press harder! Harder!"

Can you be happy when you are in want? Putting endless patches on torn clothing, endless layers of solder on battered pots when there's no metal left?

Like monsoon rain, life poured out its anecdotes over Balidatta's head. There was no selection here, no embellishment: it was just an outpouring. He had created his own slender yardstick out of life's experiences and that was all he could use to measure and to assess. Foolish Bannu could laugh on an empty stomach and belch his satisfaction; but those who had plenty, those who had achieved and hoarded away abundantly, felt themselves impoverished.

For example, there was the Deputy Manager. Insomnia wouldn't let him rest; all night, he tossed restlessly in an armchair on the verandah. The powerful frame had shrivelled. One evening he had clutched helplessly at Balidatta's hand and marched him up and down the field, reciting his woes. And what a tale of epic suffering it was! His salary grossed thirteen hundred a month; income tax was deducted at source. The insurance policy cost him a pile; two hundred went each month to maintaining the huge motorcar; the house he had just built was draining his resources. How was he going to manage? He was ruined! That was not all; he had been humiliated in the office. Mir Madan Khan and he had entered the Company's services on the same day; Mir Madan was now "Khan Bahadur[1]", whereas he was just a plebian "Rai Saheb[2]". Mir Madan Khan had twice officiated for the Sahib during the latter's absence, but the Deputy Manager had remained where he was. Was it surprising he had insomnia? Only a dumb animal could have snored in peace, but how could a human being forget?



Was he not the most unfortunate creature on earth?

It was a heart-rending narrative. Balidatta could have sat down in the middle of the field and howled in grief.

How unhappy the man was! While there was Bannu, laughing gleefully, listening unperturbed to Shontu da's homilies. What could be more revealing of stupidity?

No, he, Balidatta, would have to admit to himself that he was unhappy, miserable. He had a long way to go.

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[1] a title bestowed on meritorious subjects by the British in India Government.

[2] master; a title used by Indians when speaking to an Englishman. It is not used now.

He had got nothing, achieved nothing. Maybe he could get something now.

If he was lucky!

If he could win the new Sahib over.

Harsha stopped the massage and left quietly. The babu seemed to have fallen asleep. Sarojini peeped in to ask if she should serve dinner and found him deep in slumber. His thin chest rose and fell in rhythm; he was snoring loudly. She stood there smiling, lips curled in merriment.

Then she gripped his arm and shook him vigorously. "Wake up! I'm going to serve dinner!"

## THIRTY-SIX

Youthful Mr Sharma was not undeserving of so much adulation, because he was human and not just human: he was the essence of man's youthfulness.



One who can keep the mind and body young inherits life itself. His eyes are unclouded; his mind is unscarred, his personality vibrant, eager to give as well as receive. He is the young sapling on the stone heap—its pride and glory.

That was how Mr Sharma had always found himself. Without will or effort he had been born into an affluent aristocratic family somewhere in the north—pampered and protected.

Without will or effort he had continued his ascent, step by step; asking no questions, offering no protest, he had found every circumstance conspiring to make life's journey agreeable.

He was born almost a Sahib; in his family, parents were addressed as "Daddy" and "Mummy." Certain family traditions governed all forms of conduct; and once you accepted these, there was no one to question you, whether at home or the elite school that you were sent to. And so one learned to conform: this was known as "discipline." If you had acquired it you could be your own master, live life as you pleased. In the refined language of Mr Sharma's circle, this was termed the "development of the individual."

Mr Sharma's upbringing had followed the pattern. Economic want had never touched his personality and so he grew up tall and upright, a paragon of his class.

Then followed the best education that money could buy, that too without effort. He had never cared to ask himself if he possessed a thirst for learning; in that society, higher education was part of the life-style that one adopted unquestioningly.

Without effort he had walked into service; the position had offered itself before he had found time to think. His father had planned everything. He had boundless influence at the highest levels of the Company, and a word from him had sufficed.

Of course, an interview had been arranged; the formalities had to be observed. A panel of experts had scrutinised him from top to toe, asked him questions, evaluated his answers. The questions were possibly too easy—the kind that even a schoolboy could answer. But when Mr Sharma reported this later, his father shook his head gravely and said: "They were testing your alertness. It was a psychological test: don't think it was that easy." Mr Sharma's self-confidence was largely restored, though the suspicion still lingered: the interview had been a farce.



Many candidates had been eliminated at that interview: brilliant students, holders of university records. They had been toppled. Sharma was able to rationalise their rejection: "It was a psychological test. Book-learning couldn't have helped. The experts could gauge the quality of one's mind from the answers."

Pandey's rejection had confirmed Sharma's theory. Pandey had been Sharma's classmate at the university. The top student throughout, he had been the favourite of all the professors. Outstanding debator and orator; wielder of a powerful pen. But Pandey was poor; he had struggled; life had made him confrontational, combative. Sharma's opposite. Each of his arguments seemed perverse. "A man is tested in battle; adversity helps man to grow; stillness is death."

Sharma would laugh and contradict him. "A tree that grows on rocky soil only learns to survive: it grows up deformed. There is nothing aesthetic or noble about its knots and lumps."

And Pandey would say, "One has to live life aggressively, view everything in the harsh light of logic."

"That's the sign of an unhealthy mind," Sharma would retort. "A sick mind becomes biased, intolerant. A healthy person learns to float on the current, to skim the cream off the top. You have to face life naturally, easily; take things as they come. The important thing is not to attach too much importance to anything or anyone."

Pandey failed the selection process and Sharma grew convinced of the fairness of the psychological test. Pandey's "complexes" had been exposed. Well, let him go: let him enter politics. His was an unhealthy mind.

But something within him remained sceptical. What if Pandey had had a father like his own?

But the flood of confidence soon stifled that feeble voice. Authority was evidently not for everyone. Only a few were born to rule. A handful would ride in palanquins; the rest would be palanquin-bearers.

Nature's law. If you challenged it, you were not merely stupid; you were destructive, anti-social, a threat to society.

Like other members of his class Mr Sharma firmly believed that he represented the best that society had to offer. Human opinions are born of experience, true; but once an opinion had crystallised into an ideology, it had to be preserved, defended. It was the backbone that sustained society. When a society tried to change all its established beliefs, like the Hwang Ho river altering its course, the only result was destructon.



While at college, Sharma would tell Pandey, "What's this struggle for independence all about? What difference is independence going to make? If you think about it sanely, you'll realise that our people are already free. There are no chains on their limbs, no muzzles on their lips. No one tells them what to think. You are free to enjoy life; no one threatens your morsel of food as long as you don't threaten them.

"The fact is, there's nothing wrong with the world: there never has been! Things will appear exactly as you wish to see them. If the world seems full of blemishes, that's your fault!

"Look, people are not born equal; you can't get rid of the differences. There will always be dwarfs and giants. Water seeks its own level, doesn't it? Would there be any flow if there were no differences in level?

"You complain there's too much suffering in the world? Well, yes, so there is! Only God knows why sorrow exists. But could one understand happiness if there was no sorrow? Who would appreciate the full moon if the dark phase wasn't there? This is the essence of the Hindu faith, based on centuries of experience. It's not just some modern madness."

Pandey had retorted. These were the tired thoughts of inert minds, he had said, not the assertions of intellectuals. There were lots of other words he had used; Sharma couldn't recall them. An intelligent person doesn't store up unpleasant memories.

One should search for happiness, not scrounge about for filth and ugliness.

Pandey had lost; he would lose again and again. Let the lunatic live among his own dreams: the world would expose his madness at each step. Let him wave the banner of his beliefs, parade up and down in his ascetic's loincloth! One scrape with reality would put his ideology to flight: when the motorcars whizzed by, splashing him with mud, he would be forced to jump like a monkey. What wouldn't he be made to do! The blows would rain down on his chest, on his back: he would try to look heroic at first. Then, all firmness, all stubbornness, would be knocked out of him, exorcised.



The world didn't need him or his ideas.

But about the soundness and health of his own ideas Mr. Sharma had no doubts.

Two things were necessary, he believed, to preserve the health of one's mind: first, strong commonsense, which meant being alert to every change in one's surroundings, and secondly, kindness to others. These qualites he possessed adequately. He contributed to charities, gave alms to beggars, was visibly and palpably sympathetic to anyone in need — of course, within the limits dictated by commonsense. Having accomplished all this, he savoured his own contribution to the welfare of humanity. He had done his duty to the world.

What *was* man's duty anyway?

In the opinion of Pandey and other such unfortunate people, it was not enough to render lip-sympathy, to remove a few of society's wants. A handful of rice to the beggar, kind words

to the stricken, were only salve applied to one of humanity's countless festering sores; it would only add to the pain, not lessen it. What was needed was drastic medicine for society's collective malady; transient acts of kindness were an insult to the individual's personality. One was only deceiving oneself, deceiving others — doing nothing to avert disaster.

Well, you could expect them to hold such biased, extreme views.

Mr Sharma was amused. How many were prepared to sacrifice all pleasure? A soft bed, carefree sleep, hot tea, alluring food, a cigarette after the day's work? Living life as you chose; the salaams which followed you wherever you walked; following your own whims, in unchallenged privacy.

Woman.

He laughed.

The human appetite craved pleasure; or else the naked cave-dweller would not have created "civilisation" and erected sixty-storeyed edifices to live in. And what about Pandey himself? If he was so true to his ideals, why had he faced the interview? Ha, ha! People professed to go on hunger-strike but devoured buttered toast in secret. Well, they *must* be doing it; one *had* to assume they were doing it, because each one desires the good things of life.



So why agitate yourself over collective welfare, plans for social upliftment? How many had tried: Lord Ram, Gautam Buddha, Mahatma Gandhi. They had been supermen, exceptional. They had triumphed, but they had only proved that man wants happiness above everything else. He wants to extend his existence to the outermost limits; he wants a glorious present, laughter, excitement, sensation. Intoxicated by pleasure, he and the herd of sheep which constituted society look for appropriate forms of "discipline," self-restraint. If anyone questioned this truth — whether Pandey or anyone else — they must have a screw loose in their brains. This was all one needed to know.

That was why Mr Sharma was the right man to administer the Company's important affairs.

No ifs and buts about his thinking.

If the situation demanded it — the stick: strike, maim! The harsh, brutal call of duty! If not: How d'you do! Won't you

have some tea? Social obligations! Didn't the books say man was a social animal? Imagine, you've committed some error in the course of your work which causes the other person pain. No amount of argument can redeem the situation; but a small, insignificant expression can: "Did I tread on you? Please excuse me!" It's only human to err, isn't it? Why waste time repenting for something which is only natural? The books say: "Let bygones be bygones; don't cry over spilt milk." Full stop! It was the ascetics in the Middle Ages who whipped themselves to repent their sins, and tortured and chastised their bodies. What stupidity!

Instead: "I'm so sorry! Please excuse me!"

And all is instantly forgiven.

Modern outlook; cultured, refined tastes. An Anglicised mind. That was Mr Sharma.

From the very beginning. Born a Sahib; a Sahib in thought and action. Young, handsome, dynamic; healthy in body and mind.

Life had given him every opportunity to immerse himself in the quest for happines or, alternatively, the pursuit of pleasure. He had thrived, like a plant carefully nurtured in a garden. Its roots were constantly opposed by the surrounding wall of rough stone; but it had been bred to endure. And its survival was assured: there was always someone to prune away the dead roots, to turn over the old soil and provide fresh earth, to supply water in abundance, to tend and to sustain. Who was it that provided these services? There was no time to think about it, nor was it necessary. Things happened; that was all: what made them happen was irrelevant.



The princely croton, with its extravagant leaves, bears neither flower nor fruit; yet it is treasured, given a place of honour in the garden that is our society: when lesser plants begin to encroach, to threaten, there is always someone to intervene and protect, to move the potted croton over to a more secure spot or to weed out the intruder. Who is it? It could be the gardener; it could be the father, godfather, the father-in-law, a friend. It is the creator and sustainer of the social order: while it exists, the garden exists, society exists. God exists; the world goes on.

Keeping things the way they are, is its duty, its divine mission.

Once it was the white man's burden, which he carried into dark wildernesses, bringing light; jungles were cut down to accommodate the dazzling white edifice of civilisation; the drowsy, sluggish earth woke up, startled, yawned, stretched its limbs, and commenced its crazy dance, Shiva's dance of destruction.

And now, this trust was guarded by the privileged class, the aristocracy. Of whom Mr Sharma was one.

## THIRTY-SEVEN

"How cultured our Sahib is!" Balidatta said to his colleague Shyam Babu. "You know, I'd been to his residence yesterday with a file, and he took me into his drawing room and offered me a

seat. So soft spoken! Always smiling. When he left me to attend to some urgent business he was so apologetic: 'Please excuse me for a minute. And make yourself at home. Look around: maybe you can find a book or something else that interests you. I'll be back immediately!' What sweetness, what humility! My head was bowed with respect. Very likely he had to go to the toilet, but how many people would have been so courteous? I thought I should obey his orders, so I got up and looked all over the room. And how can I describe it for you, it was like a dreamland! Thick, glossy books, shelf upon shelf; I had never seen anything like it before. Paintings all over the room: all high art, of course, nothing I could understand. Maybe the Sahib paints. And the biggest wonder of all: a whole exhibition of clay sculptures. Statues—of do you know what? Ordinary men, blind men with sticks, beggars with begging bowls. What a heart! Yes, sir, what a heart he has!"

Shyam Babu sighed. "If we didn't have our daily bread to worry about, we too could have been pursuing our hobbies. I had hoped to become a cricketer and tour Australia with the Indian team. You think I'm lying? I was well-known in those

days for my cricket. And now, what a contrast! No sir, it was not to be! Now I have to dig into Company files."

"You've missed the point, Shyam Babu!" Balidatta said.

"The point? What point?" Shyam Babu yawned. "I'm sorry, Balidatta Babu, I've no head for complex analysis. What I say is this: if it's flattery you are attempting, do it openly. What's the use of trying to be subtle? I don't believe in moaning softly in the background. If you want to say it, say it loud and clear: 'Hail, Sharma!' "

"You've misunderstood me," Balidatta said. "I wasn't trying to flatter; this is the truth. The Sahib is an artist; he is kind."

Across the room, Gopal Babu listened with bated breath, a bunch of files tucked under his arm. The Sahib was an artist? An artist, here, among these desk rats?

Were the locked doors of fate about to open for him? No, the hinges had rusted: the doors were immovable.

He stared with rapt attention at Balidatta: round faced, one cheek bulging with paan, now suddenly immobile. Balidatta drew a cigarette out of a packet and flung the packet across the table to Shyam Babu. Then, lighting his own cigarette, exhaling a puff of smoke, he said, "Yes, the Sahib is an artist and an art-lover. His house is full of paintings and sculptures. Unless one has a cultured mind it is impossible to find time for these things in the midst of so much work. And, do you know, the Sahib's chaprasi told me he plays the sitar."



The sitar! Gopal Babu's heart turned a somersault.

Having mentioned the sitar Balidatta watched Shyam Babu's face, smiling triumphantly. Idiot! His look said, what can you understand of these things? Volleys of smoke, puff after victorious puff.

Shyam Babu concentrated on the small print on the packet of cigarettes, turning the packet over and over.

And Gopal Babu was lost in thought. How long ago it was!

He used to paint then. And he was taking sitar lessons.

No one had taught him to paint; it was just something he had started doing in his childhood. Flowers and fruits; the little house he lived in; village scenes. The banyan tree by the pond, at evening. The young calf sprintng after its mother. Cock fights. Villagers caught in different situations. Then he thought

of getting models to pose for him. A few of those early efforts, framed in glass, had survived the attentions of his children. Numerous paintings of his wife, in a variety of poses: smiling, all dressed-up, paan in hand; hair tousled, in rough house-clothes; slicing vegetables; in wet clothes, bathing. And in one corner of each paintng, in small letters, like Chinese calligraphy, his own intials: GKM.

But no more. The world of art was desolate, abandoned.

The last painting he had attempted showed his wife, broom in hand, running to chastise one of the children.

There had been only four children then.

He had done only a rough sketch. But she would have none of it. "If you paint me like that," she said, "I'll swallow some kaniar[1] seeds and end my life."

His sitar-playing came to a similar termination. No more lessons from the ustad.[2]

And now, was there really someone to appreciate his art?

In the days when Gopal Babu still painted and played on his sitar, he had never mentioned his hobbies to anyone, never sought appreciation or praise. His art had been entirely for his private pleasure. It had been his addiction. How many hours he had snatched away from essential duties, from shaving to shopping for groceries; what sacrifices he had made! He had never stopped to count his losses: the sheer intoxication of creation had outweighed everything.



But now that the artistic impulse was dead, the springs of creativity had dried up, he yearned for an admirer. All traces of the artist in him were being bartered away by the person that he now was, the very antithesis of the artist.

But the world was uninterested. The days passed; he waited; but not one person came to inqure "Who is the artist GKM? He was a good painter!" He had stopped expecting anything. And now, suddenly ...

Gopal Babu stood there with the files under his arm, sweating. He was dying to speak but couldn't pluck up enough

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[1] the poisonous seeds of a flowering plant, which are often used by women in Orissa who are driven to suicide.

[2] Persian word meaning " teacher" or "maestro", generally used for music teachers.

courage. Just then, Ranjit Babu walked in. "Ho, ho! Come in, Ranjit Babu; do come in!" "Very well, Gopal Babu, you can come back later."

"Ranjit Babu, won't you have a seat? We were just discussing Mr Sharma."

Ranjit Babu was leaning negligently against the wall, pipe clenched between his teeth, arms across his chest. At the mention of Mr Sharma's name his eyes lit up; a smile appeared on his lips. "Is it possible to discuss great people in just a few words?" he said.

"Of course not," Shyam Babu said, "but let's hear what you have to say."

"Most sporting sort," Ranjit Babu said, slipping into a chair, with a prolonged puff at his pipe. Everyone was silent for a long moment, probably meditating on what Ranjit Babu had said. Then the chorus began.

"He's amazing," Ranjit Babu said. "I'd gone on a shikar with him. We returned only this morning."

"Really?" Balidatta shouted out. To him, it was Ranjit Babu that was most amazing. The new Sahib had hardly set foot in the office, and already Ranjit Babu had captured him and taken him away on shikar[1]!



"Shikar!" Shyam Babu shouted. "Why didn't you tell me? You know, my region, where we have our mining leases, is full of beautiful jungles. Swarming with animals! And we have plenty of labourers working for us there. I could have made all the arrangements. If you had only told me!"

"Well, the Sahib didn't go to your region; he went bird shooting," Ranjit Babu said. "We bagged some red-headed geese and some snipe. That was the objective. But we were interested mainly in just getting away, going out into the wild open spaces."

"What happened? What happened?" All ears were alert.

"Well, I did get a chance to observe him at close quarters," Ranjit Babu said "But then ..."

Balidatta had dragged his chair closer and was bent like a bow in his eagerness to listen; Shyam Babu's enormous head

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[1] an organised hunt to shoot tigers, wild boars etc. Like in other countries, an expensive and upper class sport in India.

was propped up on his two palms; the others were all facing Ranjit Babu.

Through clouds of smoke Ranjit Babu said, "He's extremely friendly, simple and frank. But behind that simplicity lies a keen intelligence. Modern tastes. He wants everyone to relax, enjoy themselves. At last we have found someone who can loosen these chains of red tape! Do you know what he's planning to do? He's going to visit the home of each one who works for the Company, each one of us! Ho, ho!"

Everyone joned in the laughter.

The gathering dissolved.

The pens were scratching away. The Sahib is great, the Sahib is great.

## THIRTY-EIGHT



"Have a cigarette, Rose," Mili said, extending a dainty cigarette case. "It's true you've changed, but in some ways you're still old-hat. Shall I tell you?"

The car sped on. Sarojini smiled and said, "Well, why don't you? You've never spared anyone!"

"One thing leads to another, you know. If you started smoking, other things would follow."

"Such as what?" Sarojini said. "Maybe I'd grow a pair of wings and fly away?"

She laughed loudly. The chauffeur, at the wheel, tried unsuccessfully to suppress a chuckle and quickly faked a cough.

"It's getting chilly," Mili said. "Come on, you need the warmth. Here, have a cigarette."

Nili had dozed off.

The chauffeur concentrated on the road. He was expected to be a part of the machine, without eyes or ears. For five years he had been playing the part. But he hummed tunes to himself; back in the little room which was his home, he would break into song. When friends called on him, he would swear them into secrecy before beginning his wondrous tales.

"Listen, Rose," Mili said. "Your name, 'Saroj,' sounds like sorrows' in English. So we removed the 'sa', and the Rose in you bloomed forth. Did it do any harm? It just shows, if you can get rid of your old-fashioned ways a new individual will emerge in you—a new Rose. Here you are, a real gem; yet you're still unsure of yourself, afraid of what people will think. Afraid to smoke, afraid to dance. I'm sure with your figure you'd make an excellent dancer."

"What would I gain?"

"What does one gain from being beautiful? Beauty is its own reward. Let yourself grow, Rose; don't hold back. You're like one of those modern novels, you know: the story is almost complete, yet the end is nowhere in sight! Look, Rose; life is uncertain, fleeting. Let's make the most of it. Traditions have no relevance in these times. Throw away your inhibitions. Live."

Sarojini was unable to comprehend Mili's philosophy: but she could touch it. It felt moist to the touch, soaked in tears. The pain reached her.

"Mili, why didn't you marry?" she asked irrelevantly.

"And why did you marry?" Mili asked with a laugh.



"No, seriously," Sarojini said. "Nili and you are like two flowers; oh, I don't know how to put it! You're so fond of everything, so full of life. Why don't you get married? Can't you find someone of your choice? Don't you want a home, children?"

Mili grew serious. In some other situation she would have used cold steel to deal with such a question, but at this moment she felt too intimate with Sarojini.

"Let me tell you a story, Rose," she said. "But what story is there to tell? The more one wants, the more one loses. This is a fact of life, proved by generations of experience. Then why should we follow the beaten path? If you reach for the flower you only get scratched by the thorns. Do you think we like being scratched?"

"But the flower is beautiful, isn't it?"

"Of course it is. But is it worth all the pain, all the scratches? It's far better to sniff the fragrance from a distance. Just as I'm doing now. I say, Rose, how delicious you smell! I'm sure Mr Das would be jealous of me if he could see me now."

"Stop teasing!" Sarojini said, changing the topic. "Don't we all like to set up our own homes?"

"Yes, we do," Mili said. "If we can find someone to trust. And in this age, there can be no greater stupidity than to trust."

The bitterness in her tone surprised Sarojini. This was a new Mili.

"Mili!" she said. "You always look so cheerful; I never thought..."

"That I could have any grief of my own? Why not? In the first place, is it necessary to have suffered to know suffering? And then, why must suffering always wear a glum face? That makes sense if your sorrows are few. But if sorrow is everything, you learn to live with it, to create happiness out of misery."

"Exactly!" Sarojini said. "That's why I suggested you find a partner, start a home. You should get married, Mili. I'll speak to Ranjit Babu about it."

She blushed as she mentioned his name. "Why, look! Nili is fast asleep! She looks so comfortable!" she said, averting her face.

"Well, that's the only kind of comfort this world can offer," Mili said. "A moment's rest in a speeding car! Take what you can get, when you can get it. Who knows what tomorrow will bring? Wouldn't it be madness to build a home, start a family? Would it last? Do these words mean anything now? Why apply the values of another age to the present?"



"So? Where does it all end?" Sarojini said.

"I'm coming to that," Mili replied. "That's why I say: come out of your shell, march in tune with the times. If we're all going to be destroyed, what right have you to survive alone? Jump in with the rest!"

"And then?"

"And then, I must thank my kind audience for listening so patiently. But let me add: patience is out-dated, obsolete. This age doesn't require patience: what it asks of you is *impatience*. When you read a book, flip the pages over; when you listen to a speech, don't forget to throw rotten eggs at the speaker! How else can you establish your independence? And to all our sisters I say: there's no sin in using lip-stick or high-heels; these are the signs of the times."

"Capital!" Nili said suddenly, clapping.

"That's right," Mili responded. "Capital is just what we need! Capital is our objective; we are going from door to door to collect funds for our Women's Association.

"I must say I enjoyed your lecture," Nili said.

"What!" Sarojini cried out. "You mean it was just a lecture you were giving me?"

"How else could we have passed the time?" Mili laughed. "That's what makes life interesting: you ask someone an intimate question, and what you get is a lecture. You want to probe into someone's heart; but where's the heart? What you find is wood. But then, you can knock wood against wood and produce beautiful music, if you know how."

"Oh, ma!" Sarojini said. "And you, Nili, you weren't really asleep?"

"People are not what they seem," Nili said.

The two sisters looked at each other conspiringly and laughed.

"That's very true," Mili said. "Just look at our Rose. How wise she looks! But she's really very naive, totally unused to the ways of the world. A good soul!"

"As tame as a guinea-pig," Nili said.



"Well, I'm not educated, like the two of you," Sarojini said, pleased. "You could buy a person and sell him off again twice in the same day."

Everyone laughed. "Well, now we begin our business deals," Mili said.

The car came to a halt outside Vishnu Babu's door.

Vishnu Babu, a clerk in the Company, was strolling up and down the front verandah in a lungi, smoking a biri. When he saw the three ladies alight from the car and walk upto his house, he quickly retreated indoors.

The collection of funds for the Women's Association had begun. Vishnu Babu's wife was the first donor.

A little later, Vishnu Babu was summoned.

"Let us get organised."

"We need your co-operation."

"We must all be united. Only then . . ."

"How much filth there is! So much to be done! Oh!"

A pedestrian suddenly squirts a mouthful of red paan juice and spits out the dry, chewed-up remains onto the road. A housewife opens her front door and overturns a basketful of assorted garbage into the middle of the public road. How filthy! Buzzing with flies! Chhi!

How dirty these coolie houses are! Crumbling walls; gaping thatches, patched with old gunnybags. Mountains of stinking garbage.

Urchins with running noses. Women in tattered saris, dry, louse-infested hair streaming. Bodies caked in grime, fingernails blackened. God! Can't they live like human beings?

How different things could have been! Clean houses, gardens, orchards; healthy human beings and animals; flowers and fruits. The land would smile.

But no. People walk about in their sleep, unmindful of the surroundings. Their thoughts never extend beyond their own bellies. Ages pass, but the blindfold is never removed; nothing changes.



And that is why we must get organised.

Sarojini grew thoughtful. A bird that had flown out of its cage, perched on a branch and pensively observed the world outside. She was new to this world of organisation and concerted activity. A hall would be constructed and a Women's Welfare Committee set up. How many things there were, waiting to be done when one got organised! Filth and disorder everywhere; want and deprivation. She was starting out fresh and her enthusiasm was boundless. What a magnificent thing she was doing! Collecting donations, distributing pamphlets, or just talking about their plans, she felt heroic. She wanted to tell the whole world!

Many others had thought of getting organised, in different ways.

Some walked barefoot from village to village, selling hand-spun khadi[1] cloth, bent under the weight of bales of khadi.

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[1] coarse cloth woven manually at a spining wheel, a symbol of India's break with western technology and imperial dominance.

Covered in dust and sweat. Asking people to spin their own khadi. Laying the foundations of village handicrafts. Spreading the message of non-violence. Seeking no authority, desiring no power. Driven by a vision.

One day their bones would fall by the wayside. Only the vision would remain to inspire others.

Sarojini had her thoughts; Mili and Nili had theirs. They flowed along different channels.

Some walked stealthily, on tip toe, with home-made bombs concealed under loose clothing. Driven by other visions: terror, blood, destruction. Bombs were flung; trains were overturned, people killed. Fire, smoke, tears. Hiding, like thieves. Finally, the bullet or the gallows.

Dreamers of other dreams.

The starving peasant dreamt of changing the face of the world. The priest reciting scriptures to the gathering in the village had his own dream. "The end of the world is at hand. The Kali Yuga, the Age of falsehood and conflict, will end; god will be born again. The Kalki Avatara[1] will ride forth, sword in hand, to destroy profiteers and blackmarketers. Beware!"



Businessmen had their own dreams of a transformed world. Rivers would be curbed; the waters would be harnessed to produce electricity and irrigate the fields. Forests would be uprooted, the earth ripped open to reveal its treasures. Machines would till the soil, run the factories; poverty could never be removed unless the machines took over, and so ...

The devotee in the temple had his dream. "Sarve bhavantu sukhinaha," he prayed: Let the whole world be happy! If only there could be shanti yagnas[2] in every village, offerings made to the gods to bring about peace, the world would be a better place!

Philosophers, meditating cross-legged, had their own thoughts. "Such sorrow! Why? What can't this earth provide? All sorrow comes from unequal distribution. If we could only re-distribute wealth, reform the systems of distribution, poverty would disappear. The world would be transformed!"

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[1] the final incarnation of Vishnu as a horse that will destroy the world with a stamp of its hoof.

[2] a ritualistic sacrifice for peace (shanti).

The means differed, but the foundations were common. Organisation and co-operation.

Sarojini's plans clustered around her receipt books. They were simple. If everyone donated money, regularly and not just once, the funds would grow. Then they could be used for welfare work. And what was so difficult about that? Would they have to break stones? Be yoked to the plough? Dig up the earth? Of course not! All they had to do was to get together. If they met, they would observe, learn from each other. How to dress, how to develop good taste. To keep one's home clean. Embroidery, crochet. Decorating the home. Music and dance. They have disappeared from our lives. Healthy minds produce healthy bodies. There could be talks on healthy living. Nutritious diets. If the coolies could be taught to use mosquito nets, to use hot water, would there be any malaria? Regular medical check-ups would help to control disease. Information about the world around them. If the women could be helped, the country would prosper. Weren't they the housewives, mothers to future generations, the country's hope? The project, nurtured in their little clubhouse, would spread. But funds were necessary. If each one paid a rupee, millions would benefit.



Only, someone had to collect the subscriptions.

She refused to listen to discouraging talk. Everything was possible.

And so, when Balidatta, having listened to all her plans, merely said "H'm!" she stamped impatiently into the bedroom, enraged. She was right; those who disagreed were wrong. Her conviction grew hourly, making her intolerant. How utterly worthless he was! She took off her shoes and flung them angrily into a corner. As she took off her watch, almost snatching it off her wrist, and changed into a plain cotton sari, the same thought simmered within her: he didn't even deserve to be pitied!

She sat glowering. Balidatta walked in.

"You are looking very grave, Saroj," he said.

"Anyone who is capable of thinking will look grave. It's only the unthinking people who look relaxed."

"Oh, I see, you're thinking! Good, continue!"

She said nothing.

"What *are* you thinking about all the time?" he persisted.

"You won't understand if I tell you," she said.

He looked at her closely for a moment and suddenly bowed his head.

"Is it about a child?" he said softly. "That's in God's hands. Poor people with nothing to eat have children by the dozen, while those who have everything have none. Saroj, I've been observing you for sometime: you're brooding constantly. What's the use? Whatever is fated will happen."

But what resulted was contrary to his hope. She got up, quivering as though caught in a storm, and walked away.

But he wasn't going to admit defeat.

"I say, Saroj, did I make you blush?" he shouted after her. "Don't forget, when you've had a baby you won't be able to keep your looks or your childishness. Make the best of what you have now!"

She turned around ferociously. "What have you understood? Will you tell me?"

"Everything," he said.

"Not a word that I spoke to you! I get no sympathy from you. Are you a man?"



"You know the answer," he said. "Now listen, Saroj, just tell me what you want me to do. Leave everything to me, I'll make all the arrangements. Give me your receipt books: you'll see how much money I can collect. And after all, charity should begin at home, shouldn't it? You have my sympathy at every step!"

"Keep your sympathy to yourself!" she said. "If someone doesn't agree ..."

"You'll have nothing to do with him?" Balidatta said, completing the sentence for her. "I say, Saroj, do you really want to quarrel over an opinion? That's very modern! You certainly learn fast; it was only the other day that I taught you the alphabet! Women are geniuses, I must say!"

She couldn't restrain a laugh. "What a flatterer you are!" she said.

"That was my first lesson, wasn't it? You have to use words to charm people!"

"What's the use of flattering you?" she replied. "You don't support our ideas, do you?"

"The idea of reforming the world by collecting funds? I support it totally! You collect funds, organise meetings and committees: I'll get the credit! 'Who's the husband?' people will ask. 'There, that gentleman there!' The foot-soldier kills and the general wins the battle! Just give me your receipt books; you'll see what I can do!"

"You are the very embodiment of . . ."

"Right you are! A clever man always appears to be stupid. But remember this, he has the last laugh."

Sarojini walked into the adjoining room. He watched her fondly. How full of surprises she was! Each incident showed her refinement. If one didn't know, he could easily mistake her for a graduate! How quickly she had grown! The huge banyan tree lay hidden inside the tiny seed. The world was full of surprises. And the greatest surprise of all was his wife.

And in the next room, she was thinking about what he had said. Why had he said he was going to have the last laugh? Had he heard something?

She started blankly out of the window while her thoughts turned inwards.



## THIRTY-NINE

Suspicions come and go; the unending play of the restless wind with the tattered clouds continues across the sky.

Like desire gone mad, the wind roars, driven by its own fancies; it toys with all restraints and loses its own identity.

Sarojini was like the wind, in her aerial world.

Balidatta's home was her dark cavern, where she had no motion. Here she hung idly, waiting for release; and once she had found an escape she was all movement, like the wind.

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The auspicious night arrived.

The Women's Association was to be inaugurated. A cultural programme was being staged in the new auditorium.

Many had been invited. The guest of honour was Mr Sharma.

They would be arriving.

The organisers were tireless in their enthusiasm.

The night would surely be memorable. Historic.

The crowds were swarming.

"Women". The word was enough.

Something was bound to happen. It was only human to wait expectantly.

They came. Paan, biris and cigarettes. Hands holding sticks, hands holding torches, hands holding nothing. Pedestrians and motorists. Bachelors and couples. Invited and uninvited. Crowds.

The inaugural night.

The doors would open; the curtains would go up. Curiosity was tinged with impatience.

Women were uppermost in every mind, but the words spoken were trivial, meaningless.



Old Khoba Khan stared at the curtain with dim eyes, tugging at his spectacles. In a grave voice he was threatening a subordinate who stood beside him: "What, Dinabandhu? Have you done what I told you to do? You are useless! Just wait, I'll fix you!" Now he was squatting cross-legged on the ground; the tired old body felt relaxed, assured. Still staring at the curtain, the anger forgotten, he said "What was I saying?"

Young Dinabandhu had two paans tucked away in one cheek. The threats were beginning to make him sweat. Khoba Khan was not to be taken lightly. Standing upright, trying to dodge the angry words, he glanced at the curtain. Keeping one foot erect, he was slowly moving the other around. "Yes, this scolding will come to an end soon; Khoba Khan is not immortal."

Scrawny Agani Rout was blowing clouds of smoke through pouting lips. He was delivering a short oration on the economics of rising prices, but his eyes were focused on the curtain.

Elephantine Shyam Babu, perspiring from the heat, was strolling restlessly. He had already informed everyone that it

was past his dinner time and he was famished. Here and there, groups gossiped as usual about the office; occasionally, there were outbursts of bitter criticism. Heads bent low to catch the whispers or turned around warily to see if they were being observed.

Bright lights. Paper streamers, paper flowers, flying. The curtain trembled but did not rise. Chairs everywhere.

"The Sahib is coming! The Sahib!" the humming spread. Abruptly, the awareness of the daily bread grew palpable. The Sahib — the foundation of all hope. And fear.

Instantly the goblin of frivolity was blown away and they turned into men of action. Marching off to work in diligent groups; heads bowed conscientiously in toil; returning in orderly droves like homing cattle. It was as if someone had stunned them with a single lash of the whip: they stood up in hushed attention. Those who were empowered to stand in the Sahib's vicinity, the senior executives, rushed towards the driveway. "The Sahib, the Sahib," Khoba Khan muttered, rushing off, his coat half unbuttoned, stocky body bent double. Shyam Babu strutted like a havildar[1] on parade; Agani Rout sprinted on slender legs, graceful as a deer. Balidatta Das had already taken up a strategic position, guarding the entrance; he had used his wits to escape the crowd. The jostling and shoving began; the officers in front and behind them, the underlings, surging forward in groups — in no great hurry, but compelling in their pressure. Elbows thrusting, feet crushing. Pressing others down by their shoulders, standing up on tiptoe, necks craning. And now the roar of "Sahib! Sahib!"



At the entrance to the auditorium stood the members of the Organising Committee in a row, with Sarojini at their head. The Sahib's motorcar advanced slowly, its engine roaring imperatively. Ranjit Babu's car followed, with other cars trailing. Sarojini stood haloed in the dazzling headlights, as if rising from the waves; behind her were Mili, Nili, Bindu and others — a procession of beauty. The thick garland of flowers in Sarojini's hands swayed like a snake, eager to coil itself around the Sahib's neck. Smiling softly, she steadied the garland. The car stopped.

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[1] sentry; a police official a little higher than a constable in rank.

There was a small crowd of officers near the entrance, waiting to greet the Sahib. Mr Sharma alighted. Conch shells blared and dozens of women ululated, their tongues quivering rapidly inside their mouths to produce a shrill, piercing howl — the auspicious, welcoming sound of the hulhuli.[1] Startled, Mr Sharma slowed almost to a halt and Ranjit Babu, smiling, walked up to explain: "Sir, this is how we welcome our guests in this part of the country. Its traditional."

"Its beautiful!" Mr Sharma said. His eyes met the rising wave of beauty. Sarojini approached. The welcoming smile, the namashkar, the garland extended. Mili and the others followed. The Sahib lowered his head and Sarojini, as though in a trance, hung the garland round his neck. Mr Sharma gazed at them. Sarojini's heart raced; all that she had planned to say remained unspoken. Mr Sharma was vaguely aware of someone standing close to him and attempting to speak: he turned his head, and there was tiny Balidatta Das, agitated, pointing to Sarojini and saying: "My wife, sir!"

Quickly taking charge of the situation, Ranjit Babu introduced everyone to Mr Sharma. Slowly caressing the garland that hung from his neck Mr Sharma said: "Thank you very much indeed; I am most grateful!"



They escorted Mr Sharma to his seat. The show began.

## Forty

When they met in the office or on the way, friends and acquaintances greeted him: "Congratulations, Balidatta Babu! How fortunate you are!"

Ranjit Babu was lavish in his praises. "Please congratulate her on my behalf! You may ask why I am asking you and not doing it personally. The fact is, I just can't praise people to their faces. That's my weakness."

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[1] shrill, piercing sound made by women believed to be auspicious, often used to welcome an honoured guest.

Junior officers and clerks smiled as though wishing to convey something. They looked in his direction, gestured and laughed among themselves. He wondered what they were saying. They were surely praising Sarojini's performance. How splendidly things had gone that night! Was it surprising if they were looking for an excuse to convey their appreciation? But he wouldn't encourage them. Discipline had to be maintained.

The day after the inauguration, Mr Sharma's stenographer had called on Balidatta. A South Indian gentleman, he was known for his secretiveness, only smiling knowingly when he was questioned. Yet he had come to Balidatta on his own and confided "The Sahib is very impressed!" Spoken in a whisper, of course.

What more could a man desire?

For a working man, this was heaven!

But a heaven he had scarcely been able to share with Sarojini. Ever since that night she had looked grave and thoughtful. Brooding over something. Well, let her find out: responsibility brings worries as well as glory. How she had argued with him! The woman's responsibility is greater, she had always claimed. Looking after the household, lighting the hearth, getting the meals ready. The endless duties of the kitchen. Proudly she said: "Would you be able to manage? Do you even know how the morsel of rice comes to your plate? You men! You make fun of the kitchen hearth, but have you felt how the whole house smiles when the hearth is lit? The earth itself would grow cold if the hearth wasn't lit: it's Agni, the Fire-God. Men cannot understand its importance. There's fire in women, not in men." Right you are! One can feel the fire, ha! ha! The scriptures say so, don't they? But why hasn't the fire made the seed sprout yet? Well, never mind — there's still time. If it's fated, it will happen. Anyway, it's a good thing she can step out of her kitchen and see what real responsibility is! Maybe she's making new plans for the Women's Association. That's what makes her so thoughtful. Even her thoughtfulness did him credit.



The whole world whispered: how fortunate you are, Balidatta!

The intense pleasure in his mind gave him a new awareness. Suddenly he could see things he hadn't seen before. How

beautiful the flowers in his garden were! When he stood on his verandah and looked out, the earth seemed to rise in waves. How attractive! Around the well the grass had grown luxuriously and the sunlight turned the wet grass an opulent green. How soothing it was to the eyes! Whose bullock was that, grazing beyond the fence? How tall, how sleek it was! Flies would slide off its back, as people in the village might have said. Happiness had even made him generous: "Harsha, how long has that poor beggar been crying for a handful of rice? Why don't you give it to him?"

Two days after the event, he had suddenly come across a report in the newspaper, as he sipped his evening tea. "Saroj! Saroj!" he screamed, "Come and have a look!"

Perched on the arm of his chair, she had read through the report. With the teacup held near his mouth he was examining each word excitedly. "Your name is misprinted," he said, "the 'i' sign over the 'j' hasn't appeared. The rest is correct. Well, my name has appeared too! Thanks to you. Good reporting, that!"

"What's there to get excited about?" she said. "All kinds of riff-raff get their names in the papers."

"The Sahib's name appears too," he said, still reading. "Well, naturally; he was behind everything! Nothing is possible without a patron. You know what they say: a poem, a woman or a creeper cannot grow without support!"



"What rubbish you are talking in your excitement!" she said, with feigned anger. "Poems and creepers! This was just an ordinary event."

"You don't understand," he said, shaking his head sagely. "This was no ordinary event. You shouldn't take newspaper reports lightly. This is not just an individual impression: it's what the whole country is talking about! People spend millions to get their names in the news. And we've got this honour unasked! Just think: how many people would have read this today. Not just here — everywhere! This report in the Oriya newspaper may get translated and published internationally! The whole world will know! People in America will ask: 'Who is Balidatta Das? Sarojini Das? What are they like?' Don't think the newspaper is so cheap, Saroj."

"What else? Once it's been read, who bothers about it? You use it to wipe your shoes and wrap your garbage in, or else to

light the fire in the kitchen. And you say everyone is talking! What rubbish!"

"You'll see!"

## Forty-one

But he it was that saw, dimly through the haze that separates the dream from its recollection, sleep from wakefulness, that enormous motor-car which you could never mistake if you had once seen it. Rushing headlong towards his house. There, it had come to a halt opposite his gate! And who should step out but the Sahib himself, Mr Sharma! The people walking on the road froze, each where he was, faces grave. His neighbours were rushing out to their respective gates, hands joined and heads bowed in greeting. But he was pointing to Balidatta's house. Oh God, what should he do? He was coming in!



"Saroj, Saroj!" he shouted, rushing madly from this room to that. Snatched up a shirt, examined it hurriedly and flung it away: it wasn't clean enough. Picked up a pair of socks, sniffed them and threw them away. Clothes hung from the rope strung across the room; he rolled them into a heap and hid them in a corner. Was that dust on the floor, in the inner verandah? He picked up the broom and swept it away hurriedly, then back he jumped into the room shouting "Saroj, where are my trousers? My shirt?" And again "Harsha! Nitai!" Picked up a chair and put it down somewhere else. Oh, he hadn't combed his hair! Rush to the mirror; oh damn! he hadn't shaved! Sweat pouring in torrents. He was pulling his trousers on when he remembered he wasn't wearing underwear. Sarojini stepped out of the bathroom and asked "What's the matter?" "Sahib, the Sahib!" he panted. "Where are my clothes?" She opened the almirah and brought him his clothes. As he was dressing hurriedly, Nitai came and announced, "The Big Sahib has come asking for you, huzoor. He's strolling in the garden!"

"Didn't you get him a chair to sit on, you idiot?" he shouted, shocked.

"He said he didn't want to sit down," Nitai said. "He's looking at the flowers."

With many "ohhs" and "ahhs" he finally got dressed. The waist band of his trousers hadn't been secured; the shirt hung out sloppily at the back. Crumpled collar; the knot in the tie half asleep with age; the jacket on top. He was trying his best. Sarojini came up and said, "You're still here? The court will be adjourned while you tie on your turban!" It was like a whiplash across his bare back. He rushed out, half numbed. Suddenly he realised his shoe laces hadn't been tied, the jacket buttons were done up wrongly and he hadn't put his watch on. Adjusting his buttons, he spread out his toes to grip the loose shoes and ran. His mind was restless, unprepared, as though he had left his work unfinished. No time, no time! Mr Sharma seemed to be excavating the roots of a brinjal[1] plant with the toe of one shoe, examining something.

"Good morning sir; brinjals, sir!" he panted breathlessly.

Mr Sharma turned round, surprised, and looked at him. "Good morning," he responded automatically.

"Sir, this is a very special variety of brinjal. Muktakesi, it's called. Grows profusely. But needs lots of fertiliser. Oil cake and cowdung; the more rotten the better ..."

Balidatta spoke enthusiastically, as though presenting a report.

Smiling, Mr Sharma patted him on the shoulder and said, "Excellent! You seem to be very knowledgable."

And after a moment of silence, "Where's Mrs Das?"



## Forty-two

Stupefied, he stared into the distance. The gate was open. The car wasn't there. There was no one. Each time he tried to think he could see the car driving away, growing distant, smaller. Then he

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[1] egg plant.

could see the earlier scene: Sarojini, smartly dressed, holding a leather handbag, getting into the car. Thereafter, no doubt, the discussion must have started; she must have spoken of her plans for the Ladies' Association and the Welfare Committee. Always prepared; no shyness or hesitation. And when he said, "Come, Mrs Das, let's go and find out what's happening to your Association!" how quickly she'd got ready and joined him in the car.

She had gained recognition. Other honours would follow; the ascent had only begun.

But the strands of tradition still clung, holding him back. He felt depressed, confused. Was this happiness? Torrents of fire rushed screaming from the darkness at the base of his skull; then back came the thoughts of profit and promotion, dreams of future hope, the whole edifice of the Daily Bread. Gaping slightly, he stared across the open gates. Only the creaking of the hinges, as Nitai shut them, made him aware of his surroundings.

He burst out at the unfortunate Nitai, imperious in his anger.

"Rascal!" he thundered, "You're slack in everything! Why did you leave the gates open? What if a stray cow had walked in? What would be left of my garden? Nonsense! If I don't attend to things myself nothing gets done. What are you here for, you rogue?"

"Huzoor!" Nitai said, rubbing his hands together as if washing them, "What is my fault?"

"Shut up! How dare you talk back to me!" he roared. "Do you know who I am?" He stamped angrily into the house.

When one tries to take stock of oneself, knowingly or unknowingly, many others come to mind. They are the true measure of one's being. Each one collects these yardsticks of progress as he walks along life's uneven paths. When one chooses a small measure one's success is magnified: Nitai, the chaprasi, compares himself to Harsha and exults. But when he uses a larger measure and looks at Balidatta, he can find no trace of his own identity. Only a superman dares to set himself lofty

standards; the ordinary person is content with a measure more suited to his level. When you measure yourself against such a modest scale you find yourself sometimes enhanced, sometimes reduced; your dimensions are always undecided. The question remains open. Balidatta remembers Bannu and Mr Sharma is reminded of Pandey.

Pandey. The very memory was oppressive.

Packed solid with ponderous ideas. Impenetrable philosophies: human existence is the essence of God's creation; life has purpose; life imposes responsibility, not to the present alone, but even to the future. Life is not idle pleasure: it is a means, an instrument.

Human life is not routine animal existence.

Mr Sharma almost sprang out of his easychair and paced restlessly across the verandah. When had the thought of Pandey returned? He couldn't remember. But it was disturbing. One who has been spoonfed all his life, finds his own hands growing restless. But why these regrets? The sighs were futile. Each blink of the eyelid was a token of death. Life on earth was an endless stack of layers, piled one on top of the other. Birds flew; they had their own layer of existence, the bird world. The crawling earthworm had its layer, the worm's world. The shade of the banyan teemed with a myriad varieties of grass and weed; each had its own layer, its niche, insignificant though it might be. The life that flourished at one level had no awareness of the life in other layers; but conflict was inescapable. The worm's world could be shattered by a falling brick; the pellets from a Number 6 cartridge brought annihilation to the bird's world. When the uncompromising idealism of Pandey's world cast its shadow over Mr Sharma's palace, it was like a spray of deadly insecticide on a swarm of flies. Mr Sharma was startled from his reverie: the outer shell of consciousness lay shattered. Pandey; books; life's stern purpose; life's goal: how distant they all were, how remote!



The clouds floated away.
The Sahib's palatial bungalow.
Sprawling gardens. Resplendent rooms.
No dust, no noise, no repulsive poverty.

Not a drop of perspiration. The walls had soaked up every drop.

Maybe, the mortar used to join these bricks had been cured and hardened with perspiration.

Flowers grow out of bones. The petals of the rose are suffused with blood.

The manure of sweat nourishes all art, all craft. That is nature's unalterable law.

The sacrifice on the altar. That's tradition too.

Everything is tradition. It was, is, will be. What doubt can there be?

This dreamland set in the hideous world of toil and poverty. How beautiful it was!

This exquisite object of art—could it have been created without tradition?

What did Pandey know of art?

People preach sermons on life; but do they live? Had Pandey ever lived? What is their philosophy but venom pouring from the deprived?



With a smile on his lips, face aglow, he walked slowly around the garden, whistling. Everything here had a purpose. The garden whispered: "Look at me!" The rosebushes asked to be plundered; the jasmine enticed with promise of fragrance at the day's end. The season flowers—red, yellow and purple, reigning arrogantly in their splendour of colours—created a backdrop of shameless indulgence. Everything had its rightful purpose. The soft, yielding sofa, the secluded bungalow, the plush curtains, the wide garden paths, the expansive compound. Everything existed for delight, for enjoyment. Pandey and others like him understood nothing of life.

If they did, they would shed their ochre robes.

Let people talk; let them criticise; the fortunate would enjoy life. While the envious barked. Who cared?

The thought made the blood boil. The muscles around his throat tightened. The eyes turned to piercing steel. The curve of the lips was like the edge of a rock. The tall mirror caught his reflection. A male, hard male. His hands itched to grip, to crush. Primordial instinct, nurtured through generations, awoke. He

wanted to taste; fasting was no part of his life. He desired success; it was not for him to debate the morality of the means. He was intolerant of any hindrance. When a man is so inclined, it is natural for him to use the whip, to lash all impediment out of the way, to grip the horse between his thighs and force it to submit to his will, however tired and reluctant it might be. Behind him is the strength of his class, his breeding. Mr Sharma strolled through his garden.

A volcano, seething.

Strong, handsome, elegant.

Life had given him much; it had more to offer. Life was beautiful.

Fires of passion raged within. His hunger was boundless.

Therein lay his splendour, his youthfulness.

The gift of the Creator.

The machine hummed; the creature savoured life's flavours; there were no regrets, no compunctions.

But everything had happened of its own accord; no force or violence had ever been necessary.

They had come to him willingly with gifts and offerings. It would have been cruel to refuse.



He was broad of heart, free from regrets and afterthoughts.

Whatever he got was his due; the gifts were suited to his worth. If the moths came, was the candle to blame?

He remembered the first time. He had been only fifteen then. The maid, Bilasiya. Not a maid exactly: she was always neatly dressed, her hair tidy, tied up with a piece of white lace. She spoke perfect English; her walk was confident, assertive. Her smile was cheerful.

Bilasiya was the ornament of an affluent home. She was his ayah, his nurse.

It was her responsibility to keep him immaculate.

She bathed and dressed him, wiped his face. Then one day he turned fifteen. The nerve centres of his body were waking into life. Like a radio receiver being switched on, they picked up distant signals, the sounds rising from the depths of his being. The sounds of the wild. One day, he never knew when, the wild had claimed its due.

Bilasiya had laughed. He remembered her demeanour. Small, even teeth; a small, round face; strands of loose hair on her forehead; the bit of lace on her head. There was nothing attractive about her features. What he could remember had been only her mask; an invisible wave had pushed it aside, revealing the human being.

At the age of fifteen he had been introduced.

The human body. And wonderful it was.

No toy could be more diverting.

He sought moments of leisure to confirm the truth of that discovery among members of his own social circle, mixing the secretiveness and curiosity of adolescence with the rising impetuosity of youth. But he found he had made no new discovery; it was no secret. That leisured society offered everyone equal time and opportunity to experiment. People did not speak; they knew.

Time had gone by. When one assembled the passing days together into one accumulated hoard, the memory found itself in fathomless waters. How many faces floated to the surface, sank, drifted away! He had gathered toys, played with them, thrown them away, lost them. But what he had learnt was that the one abiding relationship between human beings was that of play: the rest was falsehood. Life was a moment of play.



The young Sahib had grown up.

Somebody coming?

"Oh, Mrs Das! How wonderful! Please come! Will you believe me if I tell you that all my thoughts were of you? It's man's privilege to think, isn't it? Could we survive if we didn't think? I am amazed!"

## Forty-three

A game of tennis in the evening. On one side, Mr Sharma partnered by Sarojini: on the other, Ranjit Babu and Shyam Babu. The spectators: Mili, Nili and Mr Saklatwala, the contractor.

Ranjit Babu was losing.

Ranjit Babu was fuming.

There was no obvious reason for either. Shyam Babu had been a renowned player since his college days, dominating the tennis court with his skill and gigantic physique. Ranjit Babu was the reigning champion.

And yet, there were Mili and Nili laughing ironically. Their titters were like powdered chilies rubbed into his face. And Saklatwala? Had he forgotten that the annual tender for contracts would be invited soon? But no; he no longer depended on recommendations at Ranjit Babu's level. He was loud in his applause of Mr Sharma's performance.

And today Mr Sharma's game had reached new heights. He had pulled out all the stops. His personality had blossomed; his strokes had acquired a keener edge, his footwork a new suppleness. With complete mastery he placed the ball at will in the opponents' court, making them dance to his magic, entranced and confused. How elegantly he stood up on the tip of one foot to smother an overhead lob, the other foot stretched in a balletic pose! The strokes flowed effortlessly; ball, racket, body and wind were united in a single rhythm. Playing to his heart's content. And alongside him was Sarojini. Nostrils quivering, lips pressed together grimly, eyes blazing, rushing around the court like a whirlwind, glancing at the opponents, Ranjit Babu kept turning a single thought over in his head. No doubt about it: Mr Sharma was winning! Nothing succeeds like success. Mili was shouting "Come on, Dada! Run for that ball! You're not trying!"



Ranjit Babu looked at Sarojini. How beautifully she had learnt to depend on her partner! She relied completely on his skill. Even Shyam Babu was outwitted. What was wrong with him?

Shyam Babu was constrained. Across the net from him was not merely the opponent: it was the boss!

Shyam Babu had lost none of his skill. But then, the strategy had to suit the situation: the umbrella must follow the rain. The daily bread was at stake. That was why he had taken to tennis in the first place: it bought him the company of great men. Of course, one had to know how to cash in on it. Many had used their tennis skills to rise in the office. But was it by defeating

their superiors and humiliating them? Certainly not: it was by letting them play, letting them win. Shyam Babu's strategy was clear. As he watched Ranjit Babu's game, the player's instinct in him tried to assert itself, but he reined it in. Ah, let Mr Sharma play!

Besides, there was Sarojini. When she ran after the ball with limbs fluttering or raised her arm for a stroke he couldn't take his eyes off her. He danced around the court with wild abandon, not because the game demanded it, but because each movement of his made Sarojini laugh. He was enjoying the dance: the young lady across the net, flourishing her racket, quivering with laughter, and he on the other side like a Himalyan bear.

He couldn't play his natural game. People said his shots were like bullets; racket guts couldn't stand the ferocity of his strokes. But against Sarojini? No, this was better.

Ranjit Babu watched. On one side Shyam Babu performed his bear-dance while on the other Mr Sharma lunged like a bull. And she? Like a butterfly dancing on the breeze; within reach and yet unapproachable. The more he was eluded the more intense became his longing to grasp.



How long would this continue? The game has ceased to give pleasure: it was becoming painful, like an affliction. Social obligation demanded that he continue to play, continue to smile, though his mind was blistered. And more than civility was involved here: Mr Sharma was his boss.

Finally the game came to an end. The players prepared to leave. Sarojini's coat hung from the back of a chair. Should he help her to put it on? Courtesy required it. But while he hesitated Mr Sharma held it out with a flourish: "Allow me!" She slipped her arms through the sleeves. Mr Sharma said "Come, Mrs Das; I'll drop you off at your residence."

They got into the car. Ranjit Babu offered a deep namashkar to his superior and remained standing until the car had driven off.

Mr Saklatwala called out: "Ranjit Babu, if you are not too tired, could we have a game?"

## Forty-four

The game had ended. Ranjit Babu lounged in an easy chair, in the middle of his own garden. In his own house. Yet it was as if there was no one there, nothing; his mind existed in a total void. As if all supports had been removed and there was nothing but empty, forlorn space. Such unearthly emptiness can crush even a robust personality used to props and supports.

Reclining in his chair, Ranjit Babu belongs to all time, not the present alone. When man has once come face to face with emptiness, time ceases. The world tastes bitter. He becomes indifferent to existence. All he can see is the ephemeral drama being enacted behind rows of curtains. The play of light and shadow. Light increases steadily all through the morning; then, until nightfall, it is the shadow's turn to grow. Man sees the specks of darkness at the edges of light, the light inherent in darkness, and realises that nothing exists without the union of light and darkness. In dark emptiness lie the roots of all life, all attachment. Once again he lifts his head to contemplate the void; he has nothing, he is nothing; all is empty; he is only a wave afloat on the endless ocean of darkness and light.



How many have sat, since the beginning of time, contemplating the void! Sages, lost in lifelong meditation. Men of the world, devotees of pleasure, in moments of injury and affliction. For those brief moments they are all equated. To them, the world is devoid of meaning.

Ranjit Babu sat observing the slow passage of time. The day had ended; night covered everything with darkness. The stars were winking in the sky, pulsating with life. Countless stars. Always there, night after night; but in his present frame of mind Ranjit Babu could focus only on the darkness surrounding the stars.

If it were possible to meditate thus unwaveringly on the void, the individual soul could perhaps be introduced to the Great

Soul. In ancient times, the infamous robber, Ratnakar[1], buried in meditation, had turned into a nest of termites and become the sage Valmiki; but modern man finds it difficult to spurn the gross attractions of the earth. If he does turn his mind away, the earth's attraction pulls him back with redoubled force. The fish abandons the harsh shore and plunges back into the deep ocean to which it belongs.

Violently the thoughts came rushing.

In the darkness a new personality was emerging. Tempestuous. Primordial man.

With a sigh he sat up and lit the first cigarette. He could hear the radio being switched on inside the house.

## Forty-five

"Saroj, I don't think we can manage without a car any longer," Balidatta said, looking into Sarojini's face. Her smile encouraged him. "God has smiled," he went on. "One more step and I could perhaps become the Big Sahib in one of the Company's depots."



"Right, God has smiled," she laughed. "Now the car."

"Well, if we get a car no one will talk now. One dresses according to one's status. That's why God arranges men on different levels, each a step higher or lower than the next. Each one stretches as far as his hands will allow."

"Even those who lack hands and feet?" Sarojini said.

"Chhi, Saroj, you shouldn't always speak tauntingly because we have no children," he said. "It's becoming a habit! Everything rests on God's will! Who are we to question Him?"

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[1] the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, is said to have been written by the sage Valmiki. Earlier, he was the ferocious robber, Ratnakar. In repentance he meditated for hundreds of years, chanting the name of the god Ram. During this period, he sat immobile and was gradually buried in a heap of sand ( "valmik", in Sanskrit), in which a colony of termites nested. When the period of penance ended, he became a sage and was divinely inspired to write the *Ramayana*.

"I didn't know you were so God fearing!" she said. "Let's hope you don't renounce the world and become a babaji. Oh ma, talking of God at every breath!"

"It's true, Saroj," he said. "You know, when I sit down to my puja after my bath and read a chapter of the *Bhagwat*[1], it gives me such peace! Who is causing everything to happen? Just think back: so many of us entered service together. Did we even dream this was possible? It feels like yesterday! The boat sails on. We've come so far, and now I can think of the journey's end. A car. A house of our own. Lands. Savings in the bank. You'll have no more want. The world will not blame me; I will have done my duty. No, no, I am not ungrateful: I've received His help at every step. We've travelled far, but His kindness continues. I am still young, strong. I keep God's name on my lips and think of the end."

He was exhilarated by the new thought. Sarojini was his prop; or else his thoughts would remain inarticulate. She looked at his face, wrapped in its own fantasies. How smug he was! How satisfied with his own dreams. His eyes had never ventured beyond the little space he occupied. Her mind was filled with bitterness. This man was a stranger; his dreams were not hers.



With a curt laugh she said: "So you're thinking of the end and not of tomorrow? I'm told people become babajis when they start thinking of the end. Man's end is the cremation ground, the scriptures say."

"In that case, let's get our prayer beads ready!" he said, laughing.

"Well, you know, once your meditation is interrupted it can't be resumed. That path is closed; why talk of it now? If you want to buy a car; buy it. If you want to build a house, do so. But don't become a babaji."

"No, no, let's not talk nonsense. Just look, I've so many urgent duties to attend to! If I have to walk to the depot in this sun it's not only painful; it's undignified. Every time one wants to go out it's so incovenient if you don't have your own car.

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[1] a collection of scriptural myths and legends in verse, which are recited every day as scriptures in traditional Hindu homes in Orissa.

You know the problems. Don't you agree it's time we had a car?"

"By all means!" she said. "Do you need to ask? But if you do want to buy a car, get a large one like Mr Sharma's. How comfortable it is! When you lean back on the cushions it's like gliding through space. Like a dream! Your eyes close off themselves. Can you buy such a car?"

Balidatta was stunned. It was like a blow to the base of his skull! His heart sank. His consciousness seemed to slide into empty space, alongside Sarojini. Nothing remained of him.

This was his wife. And she could talk about the luxury of riding in Mr Sharma's car!

He did not speak.

She looked at him. The blow had gone home! "Well, why are you silent?" she said with a smile. "Thinking of the cost? Yes, it's true: one has to look to one's purse."

"Look!" he said. He didn't say "Look, Saroj"; "Saroj" was the name he pampered her by.

"You should know, money is no problem, by God's grace!

Money is only the dirt on one's hands! I don't even have to make the effort: people come here willingly with their offerings. Making money is one thing, but being laughed at is something else!"

"People will laugh if you buy a big car?" she asked, raising her eyebrows. "In that case, all rich people are open to ridicule. So will you back away because people may laugh?"

How simple! How beautiful!

But he could experience the layers of complexity behind the simplicity of her analysis.

He was burning inside. The masquerade of the success-seeking executive had fallen away, revealing a very ordinary person. But as he looked at his wife the flames gradually subsided. She was smiling. The sight of that face could wipe everything away.

She clapped and said, "Well, thank God you've woken up at last! I've been telling you for ages: we should get a car. Nothing but files and work! If you had a car I could drag you away for long drives. All you know is work; you've never learnt

to enjoy life. If we could get away from these worries even for a moment how peaceful life could be!"

He was brimming with joy now. This was the old Balidatta — the achiever!

"How little you know!" he said. "Do you think I'll have to pay for the car? All I need to tell the contractor is: 'Sethji, its's very inconvenient if one doesn't have a car.' And he'll understand! It's simple!"

## Forty-six

Dinner at Saklatwala's. The annual "community dinner," which had a different host each year.

It was there for a purpose. Like a finger forcibly thrust into the world's eye it reminded ordinary people how different the upper crust were. "Look, look!" it screamed, "Step aside! Move out of the way!" The vast compound beside the wide road; the expansive lawns; the sprawling garden; the huge mansion built on a hilltop; wide gates, guarded by a Gurka[1] sentry brandishing a curved khukri;[2] the watchdog with its lolling tongue. "Move! Get out! You're not wanted here!" The filthy, dusty huts in the distance, jostling.



The squalid world of the dispossessed and the looming citadel of the possessors. The distinctions are unmistakable, enduring.

Multicoloured lights inside. Rows of gleaming cars drawn up by the wide red gravel path. The dream world of the passer-by! If nothing else, it gladdens the beholder's eye. Who is born equal, it reminds him; are the five fingers of the hand equal? Besides, there is fate, the fruits of a previous birth,[3] the law of nature.

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[1] a Nepalese soldier

[2] a traditional and ceremonial dagger of the Gurkhas.

[3] according to the doctrine of Karma, which Hindus as well as Buddhists believe in, the soul is reincarnated many times, assuming a different body in each birth. The good or evil deeds performed during a lifetime are rewarded or punished in the next birth. Human suffering or poverty is explained in terms of the punishment meted out for the misdeeds of a previous birth.

It's fate, what else, that causes earthquakes, famine, floods; people are crushed, their rags ripped away, bodies ploughed into the soil. The passer-by examines the fingers of his own hand to confirm their disparity and bows to destiny's inexorable law.

Inside, in the vast hall, the dinner table stretched away interminably, under the sparkling froth of damask covers. Clusters of flowers arranged in marble vases, as though a garden had suddenly bloomed on the table top. Varieties of expensive food laid out in filigreed metal trays. Chairs of sculpted rosewood with velvet seats and brocade cushions. Walls and ceiling exquisitely carved. A fairyland of colour, fragrance and taste.

The dinner was in progress. The guests were chatting away.

Mr Saklatwala slowly raised a small bunch of grapes to his lips, as though struggling with a great load.

"Blackmarket? What's that?" he said. "Jealous people use that word; only those who are stupid listen. People who know nothing of commerce. Everywhere you hear people talking, spreading false rumours, false alarms. After all, the businessman must look after his business. What do you say, brother?"



Across the table was Pannalal, eminent banker, short, stocky, gravely chewing, with great deliberation, a morsel of food. Quickly he swallowed the morsel and said, "Quite right! In business there is loss as well as gain. After a businessman has suffered losses and lain low, it's his right to claim his share of profit when the market goes up. The businessman doesn't like anyone to lose: we want profits for all! But when it comes to abusing the business community, everyone is ready!"

Saklatwala laughed. "You're getting more than your share of abuse right now, aren't you, Pannalalji?"

"That's my fate!" Pannalal said. "I pay donations to everyone who asks, whether it's to help human beings or cattle! Only I know how much I have to spend on donations! And then, payments to various kinds of people! Money for sweets, money for snacks and tea ..."

"Yes, that's another hot topic," Mr Saklatwala interrupted. "What I say is: shouldn't you give something to someone who has done you a service? Otherwise, why will he bother to help you out of turn? It's only proper to pay him something. But if you do, people will say you're encouraging corruption: if you

don't, they'll call you a black marketeer. There's no justice in this world."

"Ram, Ram, brother!" Pannalal said with pious horror. "This wicked world won't last! After you've paid your donations, paid people in the offices for their sweets and tea, the income tax people will take away what's left! What profit are we making? Let people come and see what's really happening. Of course, no one will pay you if you don't labour. But while the coolie labours only for himself, we labour for others. Whatever we earn goes back to the country, doesn't it? People get jobs, industry grows. Or do they think we carry it all away in bundles?"

"You are quite right!" Mr Saklatwala said.

Balidatta nudged Shyam Babu with an elbow. "Listen carefully, Shyam Babu," he said. "The ethics of Big Business! And all of them are intimately connected with the Company! But why isn't Ranjit Babu here yet? He and Mr Sharma had gone out on shikar."

"Those are grave matters that don't concern me," Shyam Babu said. He was busy eating.



"They should have been back before sunset," Balidatta said. "The party is dull without Mr Sharma."

"H'm" Shyam Babu replied, with his eyes on the food.

In another part of the room, Miss Nag was discussing the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore with her neighbour, Mrs Pal as if the final critical judgement on his poetry was going to be passed at the dinner table.

"Rabindranath's poetry . . ." Miss Nag said. She left her sentence incomplete and concentrated on her long, painted fingernails.

"His poetry contains boundless light, the fury of the mutinous wind and a hint of nature's greenery. It's incomparable!" Mrs Pal said.

"Each time I turn to his poetry, I experience a strange sensation," Miss Nag said. "It can't be expressed in words; it's beyond language!"

Pleased with the profundity of her own remark, she lifted up her round face and looked at Mrs Pal with a triumphant smile.

"Well, *I* can describe it," Mrs Pal said." It's like something tender, hard, slender and thick, twined together. Everything melting away in liquid streams, the gross and the subtle, the subtle and the gross, all flowing into one vast flood and dashing headlong against restraining stone banks. That's Rabindranath's poetry: the breath of the Infinite!"

Mrs Pal half turned towards Miss Nag and steadied her face. This was a typical gesture of hers: she always turned part of her face towards whoever she was talking to and looked in the opposite direction. The other person could see maybe three-quarters of her face, maybe a little less. This specific part of her face, seen in the mirror, looked charming. The features looked sharp at this angle; when she looked in the opposite direction, out of the corner of her eyes, there was something mysterious and elusive about her expression.

At some distance, Nabakishore Babu sat gazing at them steadily, unblinking. Elderly, grey-haired; in loose silk punjabi[1] shirt and embroidered chadar.[2] His eyes roamed from Mrs Pal to Miss Nag and thence to the other fair guests across the

table. A tug-o'-war seemed to be going on for his attention: his eyes were dragged now to this side, now to the other; in front, behind, all around. Now they alighted on a full-blown, sari-clad breast, now on a fair cheek, now on a slender neck or arm. Nabakishore Babu was feasting through his eyes. Sagging cheeks, lips gaping slightly in a perennial half-smile, long shining teeth. He was an occasional poet, a man of leisure.

No hindrance. Everyone was busy, dining and talking.

No snatching. Only genteel offering and receiving: "Please, won't you have just one more?"

Friends, dining together. No constraints, no bans. A civilised, disciplined community which safeguarded the individual's personality.

Dinabandhu Babu was busy eating, head lowered. Not too busy, however, to conduct a rapid assessment of prices. He concentrated on the most expensive items of food.

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[1] a loose long shirt, the traditional garment of the men of the Punjab.
[2] shawl.

Hari Babu carried on a loud commentary on the quality of the food. "Hey, hey, hey!" he chortled, "Dinabandhu Babu is wise. Hey, hey!"

"Ram was unable to come," Dinabandhu Babu said between mouthfuls. "He has written: 'Uncle, I'm busy trying to make arrangements for my studies in England.' Our Deputy Manager had asked me to fix up a match for his daughter; I'm trying my best, but will the boy agree? He seems to be dead set on going to England."

" You should arrange a meeting between the boy and the girl," Dhaneswar Babu said. " Let me know if you find it difficult. If he could only see her dance once ! Can't you find an opportunity? He will be charmed, I tell you ! She's giving a performance next month. Why don't you ask Ram to come?"

"Do you think he'll come?" Dinabandhu Babu said. "He's not like you and me. Right now, England is all he can think about."

"Don't say that, " Hari Babu said, " You've *got* to arrange this marriage somehow ! Arranging a marriage is like building a temple, you know. And as for sending Ram to England for his studies, let's propose it to our Deputy Manager. Why shouldn't he spend on a suitable boy? He can afford it ! Would you like me to speak to the Deputy Manager Sahib?"



" I don't dare get involved," Dinabandhu Babu said. " He does call me 'Uncle,' but I'm no relation."

Then, various matters relating to the office and the service. There was no need to wait for an appropriate time or place to talk about such things. The topic never grew stale. The discussion moved on to personalities. They hadn't planned it that way; it just happened.

Sarojini was sitting at the table. Shyam Babu loomed on one side of her. His appetite was enormous. From time to time she was made aware of his powerful presence, underneath the table. He didn't say much; he was busy eating. But the look in his large eyes spilled over, speaking of unfulfilled hungers. Sarojini was immersed in her own thoughts.

She had dressed for the occasion carefully, thought of appropriate topics to discuss at the table. The dinner was an important event. But now she wondered if it had been worth the trouble. Was eating everything?

She couldn't blossom in that crowd. A fragment of the design had been created, but not the whole: the centre was lacking. The sounds didn't blend; there was no music, only noise. Not even noise. Hers was distinctive sound, but its distinctiveness had been muted.

Indeed she was a nobody in this assembly, because to be a somebody you need somebody: you cannot make an impression on your own. It is others who coax your personality out into the open, where your distinctiveness can be noticed. But here there was no one to draw her out. They were all busy, in twos or fours, engrossed in their own little worlds. She was ignored. Both Mr Sharma and Ranjit Babu were missing. Dark clouds were massing in the sky outside.

How quickly the stars were being extinguished !

Now, almost total darkness. The wind howled.

Black clouds reared their hoods and spewed out torrents of blinding lightning.

A signal. Out of the dark corners of the sky, the rumbling of the clouds, swelling into a single deep thundering roar, poured forth. In the dance of lightning the earth now lit up in vivid illumination, now darkened, lit up again, grew dark. The wind screamed; the frenzied dance continued in the sky.



Only motion, without form.

Her heart trembled. Why? What was this terror? What omen was this? Now it was difficult to pick out anything: only the whirling, dizzying dance of massed blackness, the roaring of the wind.

She sat holding a spoon in her hand. Only her body; her mind was away, swirling wih the dark clouds overhead. Flying through realms of death. The thundering, roaring, howling sounds of death were everywhere. Portents. Like the winking embers in the cremation ground; the vultures perched in the solitary banyan tree, waiting; the prickly hedge of cactus bushes. The ancient karanja[1] tree, smeared with vermilion, where Chandi,[2] the goddess of the cremation ground, dwelt.

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[1] a thorny tree bearing small red berries.

[2] the ferocious goddess of Death, the destroyer of Evil, who is supposed to reside in cremation grounds.

Primeval trees blighted by lightning, their hearts seared. Towering giants of the forest, uprooted by the mad wind bent on destruction, crashing to the jungle floor.

And outside, the busy play of light and shadow.

## Forty-seven

Midnight. A thin, sliced moon floated through the lumps of black and grey clouds. Below, little sloping hillocks of earth, ditches filled with water, tall trees rising in waves to break the horizon. The hazy light alternately revealed and hid the landscape as the moon tunnelled through the clouds. Everything seemed unreal.

Two cars sped along the road, one behind the other. In the first, spread out on the seat, lay Mr Sharma, unconscious and blood-splattered. Ranjit Babu sat in front, staring out into the open. A night of illusion; everything looked familiar as well as strange. Eerie floating shadows blotted out the scene occasionally, then drifted away. A glow spread intermittently through the dark and faded: the forms and colours of the mind, enlarged, filled the sky.



The shadowy outlines of familiar landmarks appeared; they were approaching the outskirts of the town. Rows of fences, the large pond, the old brick kilns. The Company's factories; houses, rising like anthills; familiar roads, meadows. Mr Sharma lying unconscious in his own blood. Will he live? Maybe for a few hours; then, a corpse, slowly turning into clay. Everything was false; a dream. And advancing through this night of horror, bearing a corpse, was Ranjit Babu. Death's messenger.

Stillness everywhere. The numb mind hovered over familiar objects. Speechless, wordless. This isn't true! It can't be! Bright lights, vivid colours and vigorous forms: where are they? Only a procession of death, speeding through the darkness. The cars raced on.

The body's youth, the body's splendour, exuberance, like a waterfall splashing, sparkling through rocks. Where are they? Only the dying moon, the ghostly night.

He stared madly through bloodshot eyes, tearing unconsciously at his own hair. Shirt unbuttoned. Still there was no peace; the breath was strangled, his face burned, the restless mind yearned for deliverance. Oh, when will this end? How much longer?

The deserted road. The houses on either side sprang into life under the blazing headlights, then retreated. The names of the dwellers, inscribed on the gates, suddenly materialised and vanished. At the sight of familiar places, memories and impressions of everyday life came rushing back, making the mind even more restless. Like being swept away by an unknown, rushing current at one's own doorstep.

But why should he fear? The people in the second car had witnessed everything. He was innocent!

Yes, they would bear witness. Mr Sharma had picked up his gun to examine it. He was admiring the gun, appreciating the beautiful balance of the weapon, its exquisite feel. It was loaded. But the safety catch was on. His finger had brushed the hair-trigger. "Careful, sir; it's loaded!" Suddenly, a terrible explosion! An accident! Oh God, is this how the innocent are punished? Godlike Mr Sharma, cut down in his prime! Oh!



But his thoughts wouldn't be quietened. Why had the gun been loaded? Who had loaded it? How did the safety catch get released? Why had the mind been breathless with curiosity? Doesn't the morning have a premonition of the evening's events? Mr Sharma would be food for vultures and jackals. Oh, the horror!

The hospital. The cars screeched to a halt. They got out, grave and silent. Suddenly, everyone was active. Mr Sharma was carried away in a stretcher. Doctors and nurses in sparkling white aprons, solemn. Lights. Unreal. And through that dream the sound of Mr Sharma muttering: "Tell Balidatta Das. I haven't forgotten! I've sent in my recommendation. He'll be promoted! You'll tell him, won't you? Don't forget!"

Ranjit Babu stood with bowed head. This is Mr Sharma. Lying with eyes shut. No more sounds. Is he alive? The doctors were crowding round the operation table, bending over him anxiously. Stillness all around; only the faint hum of the ceiling fan. Outside, the same night. The darkness had become even

more intense. Everything is unreal; a dream. One must gather up one's courage, be as firm as rock. But was there any escape from oneself? Within, there were walls collapsing, strands being ripped apart; everything sank, everything lay smashed. Is this life? What terror is this? A dream? How easy it is to exist if you can treat life as a dream! You can be living and yet not living! To be able to forget; to escape the consequences of one's actions! To be able to blend with the darkness, to rise above time! Neither growth nor decay; neither past nor future.

His body quivered; nerves jangled like taut steel strings. The wind assaulted the battered body, laying callous fingers on raw flesh. Consciousness was suddenly heightened. A new nerve had been exposed within him, throbbing with pain. But it would have to be covered up, hidden away.

But life had been stained.

Who was Sharma to him anyway? How many Sharmas died each day? Who cared?

If only the mind could be persuaded! But it baulked. The scar turned livid; the stain wouldn't go away. How different this night was from other nights! His mind would never be free again.



Suddenly there was an uproar. The doctors stared in distress at the blood-soaked body. People rushed about desperately. Were they Sharma's men? A gurgling sound at the throat, like water drying up in the tap. Then everything was quiet.

## Forty-eight

Like wildfire the news spread that night. They came running. An unending stream, from midnight to afternoon. Crowds of people milling all over the hospital grounds as if going to a fair. Those who had arrived earlier pointed out the room to those who were arriving. The late arrivals stood gravely for a minute, looking at the room. Bare walls, on which the sun and rain of many seasons had deposited their fingerprints. Inside, the walls were spotless. The single door to the room was shut. They looked at

the shut door and conjured up their own pictures of the dead. The horror that death inspires in the living; the shudder that refutes the certainty of dying. Bowing their heads to the great truth they stood in silence for a minute or two, trying not to think of anything at all. Then, life asserted itself. The abundance of life, rising in waves, swept away the miasma of death. The observers turned away and mingled with the crowds, chewed paan, smoked and loosened their tongues.

Gossip. Unfettered by any sense of responsibility. They talked freely, to their heart's content. Their deliberations contained much that was true, much that was false; much that was invented, exaggerated; flying conjectures. Together, it all added up to the firm conviction of the crowd, not the mere opinion of the court. Out of that conviction were forged stories of Ranjit Babu, stories of Balidatta, of Sarojini and many others. They filled up their little pots from that great pool of conviction and carried them away to their homes. The stories spread. Suddenly everyone's sympathies were with Mr Sharma. In life he had been aloof, unfamiliar; death had made him intimate, lovable. They all felt sorry for him. The most private details of his life were public property; each one felt entitled to discuss him; each one suggested means by which the tragedy could have been averted. The man who had died was now only a name, only a symbol of human existence; it is flesh and blood that creates barriers between people, and in death Mr Sharma had knocked those barriers down and made himself everyone's friend.



At the usual hour, the engines were started; the Company's factories resumed production; the offices hummed with activity. Each one was busy. Balidatta tended his files. Precisely at one o' clock, the telegram was received from the head office. The Company's establishments everywhere were to be closed for the day. A condolence meeting was convened. They stood in silence for three minutes in memory of the deceased. Ten minutes of speeches, and then they returned home to enjoy the unexpected holiday.

Balidatta came home.

In the bedroom, all alone, Sarojini lay on the bed, with her face buried in the pillow, weeping. Balidatta did not enter. He felt a hot flame searing his insides.

This was his home. This was his wife.

Alone, in the outer room, he sat with his head propped up on his two hands.

## Forty-nine

Sarojini kept to her home. Every passer-by seemed to be staring in her direction; she could imagine their curiosity, their conversation. It was humiliating.

Nobody may speak, but when you look into your own heart you can hear every word that could have been spoken. She felt tormented. What harm had she done? Why wouldn't the world leave her alone? Why the accusations?

Mumble, rumble, chitter, chatter! A thousand tongues wagging away. She remembered the days in her village. How swiftly the scandals had come floating! Then it had been about others, not her. Life was a little basket; nothing could be hidden. Every sound was carried by the wind. When you flung a pebble into the pond the ripples quickly spread to the bank. There were no secrets.



She was quite sure everyone was talking about her. The veterinarian's wife, her neighbour, seemed glued to the window. Why did she never call on Sarojini? She must be laughing in private! But Sarojini had forgotten: it was she who had given up the neighbourly visits, in the days when she was learning to knit little woollen dogs. She had moved on, flown away to higher levels. The veterinarian's wife had been forgotten, and she too had stopped calling. No one came now. Mili and Nili least of all. How quickly they had abandoned her! Once again, Sarojini forgot it was she that had dropped the Women's Club. She had distanced herself. Mili had written to her: "I shall not call you 'Rose' again, because you are the very embodiment of 'Saroj'—the Lotus ! Thank you for your help, my friend. Farewell!" What did it mean? What did it not convey!

And Nitai—unperturbed as ever. When she looked into his face she sensed, behind the mask, the same attitude of

accusation. He appeared to be saying nothing, but he was bound to be talking! How his face must be lighting up with obscene glee when he gossiped! She shivered. And that little imp of a Harsha! He must be making up all kinds of tales! The rascal! Angered, she would scold him without reason, shout at him. She wished she could shower blows on his head, but she was afraid of Balidatta.

She was really scared of Balidatta. As though she had been locked up alone in the house with that short stocky midget; as though he was her jailor, standing guard. Who knew what horrible things he could do to her? One look at him was enough to terrorise her. He looked extremely grave, extremely busy. No time to talk. He went out every evening, came back late; worked late by lamplight, until much after midnight. When she lay in bed feigning sleep, she sometimes saw him come in and lie down on his side, facing the other way. A few long sighs, and then he would drop off to sleep. This had happened earlier too: Balidatta lived only for his work; it never occured to him to look into her concerns. But now Sarojini saw him differently. She was convinced his solemnity had been put on to torment her; he was waiting for an opportunity to pounce. She was constantly thinking of ways to protect herself if the attack came: she prepared her weapons. Like a cornered cat sheathing and unsheathing its claws in anticipation, baring its teeth. But she couldn't look him in the face. And he gave her no provocation, no excuse to fight. His very calmness frightened her. She could feel her own personality crumbling. That shattered personality was her only refuge now. She lay supine, licking her wounds, ears alert, eyes watchful.



She was pining away in that unremitting darkness. She had lost her appetite; sleep eluded her. Sometimes, when she lay down, tired and feeble, her head throbbing, she lost all consciousness; bright day turned into night. But there was no respite. Horrible visions floated up. The torment continued throughout the day and night, awake or asleep.

She remembered the afternoons in the village when, as a young girl, she had listened to grandmothers reciting the scriptures. So it was true, she thought: hell really existed! This torture, this constant fear — what was it if it wasn't hell?

Sometimes, when she sat alone in her misery and self-pity, thoughts of suicide came to her. But she couldn't do it; she wasn't strong enough.

But nature has a way of creating new afflictions to heal existing ones. When the darkness becomes intolerable some faint gleam of light appears; sickness turns reluctantly but inexorably to health.

One day Sarojini realised there was new life budding within her. The fragments of dreams had joined together and become flesh and blood. A new experience. Within her as well as all around. Suddenly nature seemed to be burgeoning with life: the trees were green with tender leaves; flowers bloomed in sparkling colours. Where was the sorrow? The tide of happiness was rushing in. She seemed complete in herself; she needed no one.

How much of the world had she seen within this short time! How many people, how many circumstances! Now that the pearl was growing within the oyster, the oyster folded itself shut.



The past was dead. Mr Sharma: a pleasing memory that had turned into a nightmare. Ranjit Babu? The other day Balidatta had informed her that he had gone away on long leave, on grounds of health. A brief glow that had brightened her existence and then faded. Mili, Nili; the Women's Committee. Involvements and commitments. They belonged to the night; the morning had wiped away the memory and the pain.

Shadows of existence. They come in crowds, play their parts, and disappear. This has been happening through the ages. What remains, when the fanfare and the spectacle are ended, are the eternal beings: Man and Woman. The circumstances do not matter: the story could take place anywhere. The soil is implanted with seed; the earth grows expectant with the warmth of new life, the hope of new creation. The pregnant earth, exuberant with the joy of conception, is complete in itself; it seeks no attachments. The earth has realised itself: it is the unending store from which creation renews itself, the source of all mystery, all joy. The earth abides.

Sarojini renewed herself through her fresh personality.

How inexplicable life was, with its millions of layers of experience! Fascinated by her own mystery, she leaned back on her dreams. And they did not shatter.

## Fifty

Balidatta was overjoyed when he learnt that Sarojini was expecting his son and heir. One jerk seemed to have stripped away the accumulated deposits of solemnity and reserve; he became his old garrulous sermonizing self. "At last, Saroj ", he said, "at last!"

The lady doctor had just given him the good news as he sat in front of the mirror, shaving. "She's a little anaemic, you understand," she had said, with the hint of a mischievous smile. "Give her lots of orange juice. Calcium tablets and Vitamin B Complex. Here's the prescription. And the urine to be examined at least once a month."



He had felt obliged to give the doctor a call when her health started to cause concern. But this good news!

The round, chubby face in the mirror. He could hardly take his eyes off himself, his heart puffed with pride. Perhaps he should grow a moustache. It would look manly on him.

"Saroj, I can't forgive myself," he said. "I've been so busy I've had no time to think of your health. I should have taken you out for walks. But I should have known! It was in my horoscope. A son to be born in my thirty-ninth year! Promotion. My wife was to have slight health problems. But that's over now. This child is to bring me good luck; the climax of my career! Do you know, Saroj: I'm being promoted! To Number One! The Big Sahib! Can you imagine it? Oh, Saroj, Saroj!"

He leaned backwards, eyes lowered. Bashful, smiling shyly. This is how it happens! The most natural thing in the world. She had brought him luck; who else? She was the dearest, the most precious thing he had. One heart; one soul. The purpose behind all his efforts. His wife.

He looked around the house, pleased. The eternal husband! His smugness came partly from confidence in himself, partly from the propensity to dream with which Nature blesses each one of us, partly from attachment to that familiar, known body. He was the husband; it was most natural for him to love her, blindly, with superstitious faith. Not to doubt. The mirror reflected his sleek, prosperous body. Flexing his arm, he looked at the lump of muscle. Well, what if it wasn't bulging; he wasn't feeble either.

"Harsha! Come and give me an oil-massage!" he shouted. He would have to improve his physique somehow! At the same time, he ordered Nitai to fetch the medicines for Sarojini. "Get a rupee worth of oranges!" he told him. " Good ones!"

"You must look after yourself, Saroj," he said. "Take your medicines regularly, or else the baby won't grow properly. Nothing to feel shy about; it's perfectly natural. But you can't afford to neglect yourself. Tell me if you need anything at all; I'll make all the arrangements. The patient has to cooperate with the doctor. Of course, this is no disease that you have. I mean, there's nothing to worry about ..."



There was so much that he wanted to express in one breath that he kept tripping over his own sentences and had to correct himself frequently. The story of his life kept repeating itself in his head; this is what always happens when one comes to a junction in life's highway. He had amassed wealth. Emerged victor in the battle for the daily bread. He had risen steadily and was about to reach the peak. But a childless existence had lacked purpose.

"Don't strain yourself! Are you feeling tired? Lie down, Saroj? What does it matter if it's morning already? You can go back to sleep. I'm in no hurry today. I'll make sure you take your medicine before I go to the office. Now, go to sleep!"

And she did. This was her husband. Suddenly she wanted to have a good cry. She buried her head in her pillow.

"No, no, " he cautioned her, "you should sleep on your back! Oh, I forgot! I've got to finalise the arrangements for the car. Or else how can you get some fresh air? I'll arrange everything today. Rest now, Saroj. "

# Fifty-one

Turning a new page in life's book, one is often startled by its resemblance to something that has gone before. Familiar scenes, familiar feelings. The past seems to be repeating itself. But the illusion doesn't last. As one tries to relive old memories, the yellowing pages crumble. And then one realises that time's flow cannot be reversed.

Reclining luxuriously against the cushions, in the rear seat of her own car, Sarojini mused silently. Balidatta sat in front, beside the chauffeur, observing each action, questioning every move. He wanted to learn how to drive.

The car had belonged to Mr Sharma. His family had disposed of his belongings after his death. Most things were sold off at bargain prices. Balidatta had acquired the car.



"Well, Saroj, " he said triumphantly. "Since you always wanted a car like Mr Sharma's I decided to buy Mr Sharma's car for you. Poor man! How he loved this car! Well, that's fate: one buys and another enjoys! Anyway, he would have been happy the car came to me."

Her own car! Hers? To whom did it belong? To Mr Sharma? Balidatta? He hadn't paid for it! The contractor who had, was still moaning over the price! They weren't likely to see him again because Balidatta was being transferred to another town. The car was hers to use.

Everything was familiar. The car. The long, straight road, lined with ancient trees. This was the hour of evening when every living creature pines for home. Birds clamour to build their nests. Looking at the scene in front she could visualise what lay beyond. A little further on was the Company's sawmill. Beside the road, hidden among the trees, was the Company bungalow. As one entered the long driveway there were plantations of mango trees on both sides, carefully tended by the Company horticulturist. Rose bushes. Creepers spilling

over hedges. Flowering profusely. The bungalow flashed by while she was still ruminating. Yes, they must have gone past; she had missed it. Further on, a small hill, half its side excavated for boulders. She could see the tops of the sal[1] trees. Somebody had told her bears came out to forage for food at this hour. In the scrub jungle beyond the hill, among the bushes, were little formations of black rock. "Is that a bear?" She would ask repeatedly.

"Where?" She craned her neck. No one there.

Still further on, the Company depot where rocks were crushed into chips. Another small bungalow on the slope of a hill, far away from the coolie huts. A small gorge at the rear. Among the cashew trees growing above, the water was one of the many gods worshipped by the jungle folk. There was a bamboo pole tied to one of the trees, from which a white flag fluttered. You could see it from the road: this was the landmark. The sunset was gorgeous when you looked down into the rivulet from the overhanging rock; you could see the fish playing in the cool waters.

One memory brought back another. The shadows of the past slowly materialised, turned solid, grew vivid. But it was all over now.



Mr Sharma was dead. Ranjit Babu had gone. The world was congested with people, but what were they to her? The dust from the car covered up each memory, each remembrance of a fleeting acquaintance; the faces crowding her mind were as thick as the specks of dust on the road, as nebulous. The few special moments of experience that stood out were also fading away like the bungalows by the roadside. Shelter for the traveller. They would remain, but the traveller had gone.

Evening was fading. The familiar places were waving good-bye before they disappeared into darkness. The car sped on. The emotions of sorrow swarming in her mind flocked together for one last protest; the life impulse was reacting to the stunning blow that her consciousness had received. Who said everything had ended? She still lived, she breathed; life flowed abundantly in her veins. Above all there was the child growing

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[1] a perennial tree of the subcontinent; a hard wood.

in her womb—her umbilical cord with life itself. Yes, she was the same Sarojini! The realisation made her quiver; waves of longing invaded the gloom in her mind.

With darkness came the return of fresh hope. Her eyes lit up like those of a predator. Sharma was gone, but his motorcar remained. It was hers now. Sharma didn't exist, but she did. The means for enjoyment lay strewn all around them; the world was full of them, but only a few possessed the capacity to enjoy. So let Sharma go; let Ranjit go—let them all go. The earth would always remain full, overflowing with purpose, teeming.

Like the parched earth she wanted to soak up everything. The unquenchable thirst of the earth, the Eternal Mother.

The car rushed through the night. The road unwound endlessly under the headlights. More open road.

She watched the trees and houses approach, waver briefly, then vanish behind her. But what's this? The place seems familiar. Can it really be ...? Yes; it was the old, familiar town where she had lived with her husband. Where the college student had lived: the one who loved to exercise and play the flute. Her neighbours who dropped in for an occasional chat. And Mr Mohapatra, the romantic busybody who loved to roam! Sarojini sighed. Then, the doors of her mind had only been shaken feebly; they hadn't opened. The wind had brought messages that she had scarcely been able to comprehend; but now, when she read the pages of the past with new eyes, everything seemed so clear.



She had returned; but everything was so different now. What was past was past. The echoes remained; she remained. Maybe, in the future ...

It was almost nine o' clock now. The lights of the town rushed towards the speeding car, like a garland about to drape itself round their necks. Balidatta turned round and shouted "Saroj! Are you asleep? "

"No, " she said.

"You've woken up then? You've been so quiet, throughout the drive. You must have found it relaxing. Good; the doctor said you should get all the rest you can. I wasn't sure if you could stand the long drive, in your present condition. Anyway, I'm happy the new car has shown its paces. You know what

people say about this make? You can place a full glass of water on the dashboard and not a drop will spill! Did you enjoy it? We're almost home now! "

The familiar buildings! That was Balidatta's old office. Then, the narrow road leading to the village. The houses on either side. And almost at the end of the road, Balidatta's old home! The lime tree at the door; the papaya tree. The kitchen on one side of the house. The scene of so many of her activities! The moist scent of weeds from the old pond, almost choked with vegetation, wafted up to her, overwhelming her with the peace of a familiar world.

Her eyes were closing.

The innocent life of the herd. It did not dazzle. Here one did not rush about seeking pretentious answers to riddles of one's own making. It lacked much, but it had taste. The car went round a bend. Everything was well-known to her. She looked back and shouted "Which way are you going? You've taken a wrong turn! There, that's where we should have turned, to the left!"

But the car didn't stop. Balidatta was roaring with laughter. "It's all right, it's all right!" he said. "Ho, ho, ho! Saroj, you want us to turn back? Back to that narrow path? Have you forgotten who you are? There, look in front of you! That's our home now. The Big Sahib's house. We've arrived! Where did you want to return?"



Sarojini came back to her senses with a start. Yes, it was true; she belonged to a different order now. She sat up, looking with hard, responsible eyes at the large gates of the house.

## Fifty-two

Next to the office building was a small garden, not particularly well maintained. But it was a testimony to the prestige of the Big Sahib. There were paths that one could walk on, and benches of rough stone for seats. Here, if one wished, one could stroll and savour the dust; for, on the other side of the waist-high hedge that fenced the garden, was the road leading to the car park.

All cars had to pass that way. Anyone who had the time could take a walk round the garden and enjoy the sights. Among the network of criss-crossing paths were patches of languishing grass. Some were triangular in shape; others circular. Some were club-shaped; others heart-shaped. The hedges had been trimmed in a variety of indeterminate forms. If you asked the old mali, he could explain them to you: which hedge had been trimmed in the shape of a peacock, which one was like an elephant. Here and there you could find plants drooping and fading away in pots; seasonal flowers which didn't seem to thrive. A few magnolia bushes; some red oleanders; hibiscus ; cannas. Stumps of dead trees here and there. The mali would inform you: it was difficult to provide water for the plants; it had to be carried over long distances. No one seemed to care. The Company could spend millions elsewhere, but here ... Besides, there were the goats. The mali would prove his point: the hedge had been breached and he had had to patch up the gaps with dry twigs. Even those twigs attracted vandals: when no one was around, little urchins came round with baskets to collect firewood. This was the garden; it had one large wooden gate which was kept locked.



Whoever had conceived of that garden had intended that the Company's employees would take advantage of it to refresh their tired minds while they were working. But the busy office staff never found time to rise from their seats. And so the garden had remained, an apt symbol of their existence: half dead, half alive, uninspiring.

The new Sahib was being welcomed. A reception had been organised. The garden was full of chairs and tables. They were all assembled there. The sheltered groups of Company employees, circumscribed within the confines of their garden. Seating was strictly in conformity with rank: first, the Big Sahib, then the Deputy Manager, then the Assistant Manager and so on and so on, down to the junior most officer. Then the clerks, at a respectful distance. Finally the rows of chaprasis.

Snacks and tea. Small talk. Then the Address of Welcome, followed by the reply.

They were his troopers. Balidatta surveyed them, rank upon rank. All were his subordinates. How quickly everything had

changed! Some faces he recognised well; some looked vaguely familiar, while the rest were new. New, even though familiar: he was not anxious to be introduced. That would affect discipline. And so he looked at the known faces but did not speak. But his mind was divided. On the one hand: the voice of Authority, which clearly pronounced "I'm supreme here!" But another part of his mind still admitted old memories. He had been a part of this swarming, jostling crowd. He had crawled out of this throng and made his way up, step by painful step. What was in their minds? Envy? Admiration? Curiosity? He couldn't contain himself. There!

"Venkat Rao!"

"Yes sir!" How sweet it sounded on familiar lips! How attentively he stood, head bowed. What next?

"Is everything well?"

"Yes sir, by your grace!"

Where's Bannu? He had already scanned the crowd carefully, early on. He couldn't find his old colleague, Banabihari Patnaik, anywhere. Yes, he had lost track of Bannu for a long time now. If they had met, he could have offered him a few words of advice: "Give up your ways, Bannu. Learn to be soft. Your wildness won't get you anywhere."



Should he advise Bannu?

No, that was no longer his level. He should look grave now. He should admonish, chastise. "If your conduct shows no improvement, I shall be compelled to take severe measures! My hands are tied: I am governed by Company regulations."

Rehearsing his lines to himself, he scowled angrily; his eyebrows stretched towards his ears in a frown; his eyes glared like coals. No, he wouldn't allow any familiarity. People would try to take advantage of old acquaintance ; they would recount their sorrows and try to melt his heart: the salary doesn't suffice; too much work; the kitchen hearth hasn't been lit; the wife's hands are bare of ornaments; the children are running wild! The same old excuses. Though most were genuine.

He would never be soft with them. Bannu would be granted no exemptions, however familiar he might be. There: he had already violated the first convention; he should have been there to welcome him, greet him. But no sign of Bannu. He

must surely be puffing away at his biri and delivering a mutinous oration. Firing empty rockets of smoke! And yet he was so fond of Bannu! Didn't Bannu realise he was playing with fire?

The garlands were endless. So were the speeches. He would have to smile, show his pleasure. Sarojini should have been here! She had the social skills.

"Your kindness, your graciousness, your humaneness, your sympathy for your subordinates, are known to all of us. Your dedication to duty, your competence, keen intelligence and foresight, have inspired the Company's confidence. We are indeed fortunate to have found in you, Sir, a superior who is at once outstanding in ability and generous in his relationships . . ."

He possessed so many virtues!

How long ago was it? This had been his field of activity. And no one had bothered about him.

But he had never lacked confidence in himself.

"You'll see, Saroj, " he had always said. "They will recognise my qualities some day!"



Now he had been recognised. His seat, his grip on the daily bread, had been secured. Not for him alone; for the child who would continue his line. The generations to come.

Now he rose to reply. They were waiting, hushed. How important he was! It was so easy to find the words if you could convince yourself of your own greatness. It wasn't he that was speaking: it was someone else inside him. They listened attentively; some were taking notes.

"In conclusion, I would like to offer you some words of advice. What is dharma? It is not merely the worship of gods. Dharma consists in being true to your duty. And what is duty? Duty is the name we give to a collection of responsibilities. Towards oneself. Towards God. And above all, towards the provider of our Daily Bread. In other words, towards your own work!

"At each step in your lives, there will be conflict amidst your various responsibilities. But if you have been giving priority to your ultimate responsibility, there will be no doubts in your minds. Your conscience will be clear. No weakness will enter.

You will have to make sacrifices. But those sacrifices will give you happiness. Work is rest! Idleness is death!

"In my own life, nothing has given me greater pleasure than work. My happiest moments have been spent with files! Because, as all of you know, one can experience life through work, not through sleep. Of course, some people may have other opinions; I can only give you mine. It is for you to think . . . "

Thunderous applause. They surrounded him. They were taking leave with folded hands. Venkat Rao followed him like a shadow.

"Venkat Rao! " he called.

"Yes sir!"

"Come here please. I have something to say."

"Yes sir!"

"Which department are you in now?"

"I'm looking after the stores in the Works Department, sir!"

"You're happy?"

"Yes sir!"

"Keeping up your interest in palmistry and astrology?"

Venkat Rao smiled. "Yes sir! If you permit me, sir, I'll come over tomorrow morning."



"Do you remember Banabihari? How is he? Doing well?"

"Yes sir!"

"Where is he now? In which department? I don't see him here."

"He left the Company's service long ago, sir."

"What! How unfortunate! Left the Company altogether? How does he manage? How does he feed himself?"

"Don't feel sorry for him, sir! He's well off!"

"Well off without a job? How's that? Has he entered politics or become a babaji? "

"No sir; he's become a businessman. He has a huge shop, dealing in electrical appliances. Radio sets as well. He's well known. A prominent citizen, one might call him."

"Surprising!" Balidatta said.

"Not really, sir, " Venkat Rao replied. "This is the age of business, you know, and electricals are doing very well. When he fell out with his superiors and left the Company, many thought he was finished! Didn't have a penny to his name; in

fact, he owed many people money. Fairly large family too! But I'd read his palm, sir. After that . . ."

"Very well, you may go now, " Balidatta interrupted him. "We will meet later. Namashkar!"

Venkat Rao joined his hands in namashkar and walked away. Balidatta turned towards his car. All his annoyance was focused on Venkat Rao. If you encourage them even slightly, they'll start their gossip! He had done the right thing by cutting him short. Venkat Rao should realise that times had changed!

The car zoomed off towards his residence. His mind was seething with frustration. Bannu had become rich and famous! Why? What sacrifice had he made? What efforts had he put in? The vagabonds who had been roaming the streets, eating air, had risen as well! Why?

How unjust the world was! How unfairly it had treated him!

He reached home.

Sarojini wasn't there. The house was empty.



His chaprasis strutted up and down busily. Harsha lounged comfortably in a chair, eating a guava and shaking his legs carelessly. The chaprasis bowed in salaam. Harsha hid the guava and bent over to untie Balidatta's shoelaces. The kitchen rang with the voices of his khansama,[1] his babarchi[2] and his bhishti.[3] The lights were on. Shining, resplendent; the Big Sahib's residence. Row upon row of flowerpots on the wide verandah. Spacious gardens and lawns.

"Harsha, where is Ma? he asked, referring to Sarojini.

"She's gone out," Harsha said. "That babu, the babu who used to come in a motorcar, in the other place, he had come. He and Ma had tea together. Then Ma and he went out together. The babu will come back. He will stay the night here."

"Which babu are you talking about?"

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[1] a servant whose responsibility is to carry food from the kitchen to the dining table.

[2] male cook.

[3] water-bearer, who kept the home supplied with water.

They had so many visitors. Was it Ranjit Babu or someone else?

Suddenly the hot blood rushed to his head. A new layer of existence. He continued to sit there, biting his lower lip. He could no longer see the gross scene in front of him; but the visions of horror were vivid. The ghosts that haunted his mind were dancing madly all around him. Torturing him; setting fire to his bones. Oh, what agony! Where was the greatness, the success? For whom? What had he achieved? He stared into the darkness, both his hands pressed to his head. This was the path on which he would have to travel; it had no end. This was the unresolved story of his life. The search for the Daily Bread had cost him all his days and nights, and in return, his own body was in flames.

Sarojini had gone out again. Oh!

He got up hurriedly. Straight he walked into his office.

He sat down, picked up a file out of the stack, and shouted: "Chaprasi!"

"Huzoor!"

"Call my stenographer! At once!"



Yes, this was best. Here he was the master! This was the factory: here life had no access.